

I was inspired to write this story after reading Nightmares of Future's Past, Fate's Debt, and the Grey Maiden series. The article is written right after Deathly Hallows, when Voldemort kills Harry in the forest. Instead of Harry coming back to life, he's sent back in time. The story continues off of this.

Prologue:

The Daily Prophet, Special Edition.

Harry Potter, Undesirable Number One, Dead. Albus Dumbledore, avenged by former student, Lord Voldemort.

By Daily Prophet Correspondent Rita Skeeter.

Harry James Potter, 17, was killed late this evening by the Hogwarts Liberation Forces, led by Lord Voldemort. Voldemort, who had been attacked by Potter, killed the boy while defending himself from harm. He was gracious enough to give a small speech as his forces reached Hogwarts, which had been in an uproar. Minerva McGonagall, former Headmistress, has been sentenced to Azkaban on charges of using an unforgivable on a fellow Professor. She and Potter led the rebellion to overthrow the esteemed Headmaster, the late Severus Snape, who managed to alert Lord Voldemort before his untimely demise. Thus, our school and its students were saved from harm. Here is what Lord Voldemort had to say:

"It is with great regret that I speak to you today. I was forced to kill a young man today, a pureblood who could have had a bright future. But I cannot say that it wasn't the right thing to do. I can sleep at ease now, knowing that I avenged the death of my mentor, Albus Dumbledore. I hope that we can all stand together in these dark times and build a new future, rising from the ashes to band together and recreate a Wizarding World our ancestors would be proud of. My ancestor, Lord Salazar Slytherin, with the help of three noble purebloods, was able to create the greatest School of Magic in the History of the World, Hogwarts. I only hope to follow in his hallowed footsteps. It is time to bring the purebloods back to where we belong, in the upper echelon of society, and to remain proud and true to our heritage."

Lord Voldemort was unanimously elected to be the first Supreme Chancellor of Great Britain, a couple of hours following this rousing

speech. We can only hope the world he helps us build will meet the expectations that our ancestors had for us. The Daily Prophet would like to ask our readers to take a moment and bow their heads in memory of the late Albus Dumbledore.

Lord Voldemort read the article, and was pleased. Harry Potter was finally taken care of, and he had finally accomplished what Grindelwald and previous Dark Lords had not: Great Britain was his.

As he set the paper down, however, he suddenly had a raging headache. His Death Eaters stared at him in concern, but Voldemort let out an inhuman howl of fury, and the last thing they heard him say before he lost consciousness was one word: Potter.

Harry Potter was one person who could attest to the fact that fate is a bitch. Harry Potter survived again, only he was living seven years in the past.

"Potter, Harry!"

Unconsciously, Harry stepped forward and heard whispers breaking out around him.

"Potter, did she say?"

"The Harry Potter?"

He was thrust into a chair and a hat was placed on his head.

"Hmm," began a small voice in his ear.

Suddenly he felt a searing pain in his forehead.

"Difficult. Very difficult. Plenty of courage, I see. Not a bad mind either. There's talent, oh my goodness, yes— and a nice thirst to prove yourself, now that's interesting...So where shall I put you?"

The dominant feeling in Harry at the moment was complete and utter confusion. He heard a voice in his head. He assumed it was the Sorting Hat. It was supposed to sort him right? He hoped he wasn't in Slytherin. He heard the voice continue talking. He decided to call the voice the hat, since that was the only thing that had changed. Magic was still very strange and foreign to him. But he

heard three different voices. And even for the magical world, that was probably still strange.

"Why are you still alive, Harry Potter?"

"You really thought you could win, Voldemort? It's not over."

"Where to put you..."

Harry grabbed at his head. So many different voices inside it, he felt like his mind was ready to burst.

"We're at the Sorting?"

Future-Harry took it in stride. "Gryffindor, of course."

"You could be great in Slytherin, you know. It's all here. In your head."

Harry began to wonder if he was really a freak like his relatives had always claimed. It scared him. He just wanted whatever was happening to be over with.

"Slytherin is the greatest of all four houses."

"Slytherin seems to be the best fit. Well that's settled."

The personalities in his mind didn't disappear. They grew stronger, and began yelling at each other. Harry hoped that everything would just end right away. In his mind, he was able to see two figures fighting, and then one of them seemed to stumble, and he was blasted into a corner and encaged in something. Harry wondered if he was having a flashback to some movie Dudley watched as the fight continued. He also wondered if he maybe had multiple personalities. Maybe that really was why they always called him a freak. Then he remembered the Sorting Hat, mostly because it began to speak.

"Better be SLYTHERIN!"

Chapter One: The House of Slytherin

Harry took the hat off in a daze. Slytherin? He didn't really want to be a Slytherin. But the voices had stopped. And if that's what it took, then that's what it took.

He looked around. Ron's jaw was slightly open in shock, and he looked as if he had just been betrayed. Harry glanced at Hermione. She was looking at him with a pensive expression on her face. His eyes swept the high table. Snape was furious. Quirrell was looking extremely thoughtful, and Harry felt another twinge of his forehead and quickly turned away. McGonagall's lips had seemed to have vanished, as thin as they were. Hagrid had broken his goblet and was openly staring, gobsmacked. Dumbledore looked mildly worried, but only someone who had known him closely could notice.

Harry had a sudden feeling that he belonged in Gryffindor, but he was struggling to remember why. What was done was done though, so he stood up and, in a daze, headed towards the Slytherin table, looking at everything but seeing nothing, while the Great Hall had descended into absolute silence.

Malfoy was giving him a look that was alternating between hostile and curious. Harry walked towards the table through the most awkward silence he had ever been part of and the moment he sat down, the Slytherins on either side of him moved quickly away. The Chosen One was now the Lonely One.

Harry looked up as he heard "Weasley, Ron!" A moment later he heard "GRYFFINDOR!" Ron sent him another death glare. Malfoy took the opportunity to hiss something at Harry.

"I said you should have picked your friends better. Too late now, Potter. Your life is going to be a living hell."

Harry thought Malfoy was a ponce— no an idiot, just like his father— or maybe he just didn't like him all that much from when he first met. Harry's head began to hurt again. Why did he have so many different thoughts? That Sorting Hat was evil. Why did no one else seem to be acting any different?

At that moment Blaise Zabini, a rather dark boy chose to sit across from Harry. The food had just appeared and Harry speared a piece of chicken and waved it at Malfoy.

"I doubt you could do worse than my relatives, Malfoy," Harry countered, then inwardly winced; he hadn't intended to let people know about the Dursleys.

Malfoy took the insult a different way. "Are you saying I am not as good as Muggles?"

Harry ignored him in favor of the food. Malfoy grunted angrily and just sat back down in his chair.

Harry wondered about his current situation. He really hadn't wanted to be in Slytherin at all. Or had he? Somewhere inside him, was Slytherin what he truly wanted? Becoming better than what the Dursleys believed him to be— was that ample reasoning to sort him into the house that was known for turning out evil wizards?

Harry noticed a ghost with blank staring eyes, a gaunt face, and robes stained with silver blood float next to Malfoy, and it chose to remain there quietly. The Bloody Baron, his mind provided. Harry returned to his meal and heard a sandy-haired boy at the Gryffindor table, Seamus Finnigan, if he wasn't mistaken, exclaim: "How did he get covered in blood?" Harry thought that was rather rude. He stared slightly mesmerized at the ghost though. Hogwarts was at once both the strangest and the most breathtaking place he had ever seen.

Harry glanced up at the head table and made a sweep with his eyes. Hagrid was drinking deeply from his new goblet. Professor McGonagall was talking rapidly to Professor Dumbledore, with a frown on her face. Dumbledore's brow was arched in concern. Professor Quirrell, in his absurd turban, was talking to a teacher with greasy black hair, a hooked nose, and sallow skin: Snape.

Some burning sort of hatred rose up in Harry and he didn't know why. Why would he hate Snape? Professor Snape, his mind corrected. Harry thought there was a reason he admired the man, but his thoughts failed him. Harry knew Snape was the head of Slytherin house, but that was all he knew. Snape glared at Harry, past Quirrell's turban, — as if Harry had no right to be at Hogwarts—

and suddenly he felt a sharp, hot pain shoot across the scar on his forehead. It hurt worse than the current headache he was nursing.

"Ouch!" Harry clapped a hand to his head.

Nobody in Slytherin paid attention to him. Harry looked around to check but all he saw was Blaise Zabini who was nearby talking. He tried massaging his temples, hoping that would help. But his mind was complete chaos.

Harry heard a bit of Zabini's conversation with the dark-haired Daphne Greengrass, a rather stringy looking Theodore Nott, and "Lilith Moon."

"Moon?" inquired the dark boy.

"Yes, those two idiots over there with the seventh year Slytherins are my brothers: Pollux and Castor," responded the blond girl with a lazy wave of her hand in the direction of two twin Slytherins. Said Slytherins turned a stony glare back at the first years, which transformed into a tiny smile for their sister.

"Pureblood?" asked Daphne.

"Who else would name their children after ancient Greeks?" snapped Moon.

"Touchy aren't we?" commented Nott, as if he were speaking of the weather.

"Yes well, we all know about Potter," asked Moon smugly.

Harry looked up from his meal. He felt something rise in him again, the same annoyance he had with Malfoy.

"The question is, why isn't he in Gryffindor?" continued Zabini. Harry felt the need to respond.

"And I'm wondering why you're all in Slytherin," said Harry.

Slightly flustered, Zabini regarded Harry coolly. Silence met Harry's pronouncement, some caused by incredulity that he dared assume

they were unworthy to be in Slytherin, some caused by outrage for the same reason.

Daphne broke the silence first.

"My ambition to become an influential pureblood in the ministry is probably what aided me above all other qualities. I wish to follow in my father's footsteps."

"I believe in the purity of blood. Those mudbloods and their dirty offspring shouldn't be allowed." He glared at Harry.

"My parents were both wizards too, Nott, if you're trying to say something else. What about you, Zabini? Or Moon? Which of you would like to go next?" Harry asked, beginning to feel at ease with the interrogation.

"Well I have no problems doing whatever needs to be done to achieve any goals I set. I would say that qualifies as Slytherin," said Zabini.

After a few moments of silence, Moon looked up at the collective group. "I suppose I have a way with making people do what I want."

Harry clapped his hands together. Almost instantly, the desserts disappeared. Dumbledore got to his feet and the Hall quieted. Tracey Davis had maneuvered her way into a seat near the group. Vincent Crabbe, Gregory Goyle, and Malfoy were further down the table with Pansy Parkinson and Millicent Bulstrode. Harry shifted his attention to the headmaster. Everyone else looked at him, waiting for his answer, but he was listening to Dumbledore now.

"Ahem— just a few more words now that we are all fed and watered. I have a few start-of-term notices to give you. First years should note that the forest on the grounds is forbidden to all pupils. And a few of our older students would do well to remember that as well."

Dumbledore's twinkling eyes seemed to almost seek out a pair of red headed twins at the Gryffindor table. Of course, Harry thought, Fred and George. Again, how he knew that, he had no idea. Harry began massaging his temples again; the headache was beginning to come on stronger.

"I have also been asked by Mr. Filch, the caretaker, to remind you all that no magic should be used between classes in the corridors."

"Quidditch trials will be held in the second week of the term. Anyone interested in playing for their house teams should contact Madam Hooch."

"And finally, I must tell you that this year, the third-floor corridor on the right-hand side is out of bounds to everyone who does not wish to die a very painful death," Dumbledore said with a stern look.

"And now, before we go to bed, let us sing the school song!" cried Dumbledore. Harry noticed that the other teachers' smiles had become rather fixed.

Dumbledore, with a flick of his wand, conjured a long golden ribbon which twisted itself into the lyrics for the song.

"Everyone pick their favorite tune," said Dumbledore, "and off we go!"

Harry hummed along as they bellowed out the lyrics to the school song. Most of the Slytherins seemed a bit less enthusiastic about singing and chose to remain silent, or hum quietly, as Harry himself was doing.

Dumbledore sent the students off to bed at the conclusion of the song and Harry followed the Slytherin prefect, Helen Stone, to the Slytherin dungeons, and he was taken to the entrance of the Slytherin common room. It was a bare, damp stone wall. The prefect said the password, *Supero Sortis*, and a stone door concealed in the wall slid open.

The Slytherin common room was a long, low underground room with rough stone walls and ceiling from which round, greenish lamps were hanging on chains. A fire was crackling under an elaborately carved mantelpiece ahead of them, and several Slytherins were silhouetted around it in high-backed chairs.

Harry entered the common room and his headache slowly started to dissipate. He felt drained, emotionally and physically, and wasn't sure how much longer he could stand. They were directed to sit down on the floor, backs to the fireplace and Harry breathed a sigh

of relief. Professor Snape strode in, the second they had all found a seat, and walked menacingly in front of them.

"You have all been sorted into Slytherin House, one whose value is underrated and whose misdeeds are overstated. I suggest that you watch your step these next seven years, as everyone else in the school will be looking for an opportunity to show you up, make you look bad, or blame you for their own stupid mistakes. Therefore, you must be pre-emptive. You must be intelligent. And if you do something, you must not get caught," he hissed. "I will not take away points from our house, as other teachers do. I never have. Instead, you will face a punishment that will insure you will never do whatever it is you did, again."

"There are ten basic rules here in Slytherin House. I expect you to follow them with the utmost care. Rule number one, Miss Stone?"

"Slytherins take care of our own."

"That's correct. When Slytherins are seen together, we must show a united front. The other houses are against us, and any discord in our ranks will allow them to take us apart one by one. If I hear of anyone not standing up for a fellow Slytherin outside this common room, you will regret it."

"Rule number two is if you break the rules, do not get caught. It is not against the rules if you aren't caught, so if you find yourself in a situation that requires rule-breaking, do not get caught. I can't stress this enough. Do not make Slytherin House look bad."

"Rule number three: Don't believe what you're told. Double-check. There is no substitute for a first hand observation. If someone lies to you, which they will, and you believe them, when you have to count on that incorrect information, it will lead to bad consequences."

"Rule number four, Miss Stone?"

"If you have a secret, the best thing is to keep it to yourself. The second best is to tell one other person if you must. There is no third best," she recited.

"Correct again. You use secrets when they are most useful to you, at the opportune moment. By telling people, you lose any advantage

you may have had. You may confide in me if you so desire, however, I believe in witches and wizards being self-sufficient, and being able to take care of themselves. If you must seek my help, it had better not be over something I believe you could have handled yourself. I don't like being disturbed over something idiotic."

"Rule number five: never underestimate your opponent. It could be the last thing you do."

"Rule number six is never apologize. It's a sign of weakness. It shows that you believe yourself to be in the wrong. Slytherins are never wrong."

"Miss Stone, rule number seven?"

"Always be specific when you lie."

"Which brings me to rule number eight: never lie to me. I will find out. And you will regret it."

"Rule number nine: make the Gryffindors look like dunderheads every chance you get. They will always look for ways to belittle you, so be productive. They are foolish, unintelligent, and hot tempered, it won't be difficult. Take advantage of potions classes, those will be your best opportunity."

"Rule number ten; the final rule: what happens inside Slytherin stays inside Slytherin. Get to bed. I expect you all to be punctual tomorrow, and all the time for that matter. Never give them a reason to look down on you. They have enough as it is."

Stone directed the girls through one door to their dormitory and the boys through another. A spiral staircase led them upwards— Harry heard someone mention they were under the lake— but then Snape called his name.

"Potter, come back down here. I need to talk to you."

Harry reluctantly returned back to the common room and Snape stared right at him.

"I did not expect you to be sorted into this house; far from it. I expected you to be a Gryffindor, and take after your father. Be that

as it may, this is how it is going to be for the next seven years. I suggest you get any preconceived notions about yourself out of your head, immediately. I will not tolerate you wanting special treatment because you are the Boy-Who-Lived. I will hold you to a higher standard because of that fact. You had better not disappoint me. I am already disappointed enough that Slytherin House must hold a Potter. Don't make the situation any worse than it already is."

"Yes sir," Harry replied dutifully. Snape glared at him, suspecting disdain in his voice.

"Get out of my sight."

Harry didn't need to be told twice. He headed the way Prefect Stone had led them and found his way to the first years' dorm room. Harry discovered their beds: six four-posters hung with brilliant green, velvet curtains. Their trunks were already resting on the floor. The other boys had already pulled on their pajamas and were sitting quietly in their beds when Harry entered.

Crabbe and Goyle had chosen beds on either side of Malfoy. He had chosen the bed next to the window, which was charmed to show the outside. Nott had grabbed the bed by the door, on Crabbe's opposite side, while Blaise had taken Goyle's opposite side, leaving Harry the far bed. Nott had returned to being quiet and reserved, while Malfoy was loudly bragging about "my father," and Blaise was content with lying quietly. Harry began to try and sort out his thoughts.

He had felt at first both annoyed and angry, at pretty much everyone. As if their very presence caused bad things to happen to Harry. It was really strange.

Harry wasn't sure if it was the strange memories or perhaps too much food because he experienced a strange dream that night. He was in the middle of a forest, surrounded by people, none of whom he knew by name, although Hagrid was up against a tree. A man with two slits for a nose was staring at him quizzically. He was pointing his wand at Harry's scar and lightly tracing the outline of it with the tip of his wand. Harry's forehead felt on fire. "Crucio," the voice said, almost lovingly, and Harry felt like he was in the most pain he had ever been in, ever. He felt like Dudley and his friends had all begun stabbing him all over the place, and he screamed. He

screamed till his throat was raw and his vocal chords strained. Then suddenly, it stopped. Harry let out a sigh of relief.

"Not so fast. Imperio." Harry felt his body, which just wanted die, stand up, right as he heard the command whispered. He came to a knee, and heard the voice say to look up, which he did.

"This is how it should be. You, at my feet, begging for death. I am a merciful Lord, Harry. I will grant you death. Consider it an honor."

"Expelliarmus!" Harry saw a jet of red light fly from the side and hit the man standing in front of him, causing the man to stagger backward and glare at the intruder.

"You won't be killing anyone, Voldemort." Harry watched the other person step into the light. The man was wearing glasses, and looked like an older version of himself. His father? Come to save him from Voldemort?

"I can't let you do that, Voldemort. See, he's more me than you are. You're the one that doesn't belong here. It's Harry's body, not yours. You're just going to have to deal with that. And there's nothing you can do right now anyway. This is just a dream. You're locked up in a corner."

Harry just stared adoringly at his father, thankful to have been saved from all the pain he was in. He was too weary to think, and didn't want to try since it would probably result in a headache. Voldemort glared angrily at the two of them and vanished. Harry looked up at his father and tried to speak. He got two words out: "Thanks, Dad."

His Dad stared at him, a confused look on his face. Then it turned into a grin, as if remembering something. "Of course, Harry. I'll help you out whenever I can."

"There, look."

"Where?"

"The one by himself."

"Wearing the glasses?"

"You think he's evil?"

"Well he beat you-know-who."

"Did you see his scar?"

"He'll be the next Dark Lord, I reckon."

"He's a Slytherin. Nothing good ever came from that house."

Whispers followed Harry wherever he went, most of them calling him evil because he was a Slytherin. People would bump into him and on more than one occasion he found himself being hit with an occasional tripping jinx. Gryffindors and Slytherins alike discovered they had one thing in common: their hatred of Harry Potter. Each house believed he had disgraced them; one believing he was rightfully theirs and had betrayed them, the other believing he was unworthy and had defiled their good name. Some of his "well-wishers" made sure to double back and "praise" him for his Dark qualities. Many people lined up outside their classrooms as well. The attention was driving him mad. He was fine finding his classes—his feet seemed to know exactly where to take him— and on more than one occasion he had ducked into a secret passage that saved him extra unwanted attention. He never realized that it was because he had help from his "dad."

The staircases, even though there were many of them, didn't bother Harry. As long as he didn't think about, he was able to get exactly where he was going. As for the ghosts, they were mostly useless if you needed help. It was always a bit of an ice-cold shock when one of them just glided through a door you were trying to open. The ghosts themselves generally didn't offer help to Slytherins, and although Peeves didn't exactly try to hinder the Slytherins, he wasn't much help either. He did play pranks on all the first years without care of their house affiliation, whether it was by throwing chalk at you, dropping wastepaper baskets on your head, pulling rugs out from under your feet and sending you heels over head, or occasionally chucking ink bottles at people's heads.

Even worse than the nuisance that was Peeves was the obsessive caretaker, Argus Filch. A squib, according to some unknown informant, he nursed a bitter hatred of all students magical. He took this out on them by being fanatically paranoid of their motives, and

always trying to catch them in some form of rule-breaking. He would then threaten to hang them upside down, locked in the dungeons.

Of course, Filch was not alone. He had an ally in the form of the devil incarnate, the scrawny, dust-colored fiend that was Mrs. Norris. Her bulging, lamp-like eyes, so similar to Filch's, seemed to know all that went on in the castle, seen and unseen. Break a rule in the eyesight of the cat, and she would whisk off for Filch, almost telepathically knowing his location, and the old caretaker would appear two seconds later, out of breath and hell-bent on issuing punishment. Filch made it his job to know the secret passageways of the school, and his knowledge was topped only by the Weasley twins, and somehow, Harry himself.

Twice Harry had ducked into a secret passage after being spotted by Mrs. Norris and twice Harry had managed to evade Filch. On one of these occasions he managed to aim a well-placed kick at Mrs. Norris's mid-section and heard a pleasant hiss issue from her mouth. Harry sprinted down three flights of stairs, ducked behind two portraits, and managed to make it back into the Slytherin common room without being discovered. This tale managed to gain him some tiny speck of approval with the first years of Slytherin house, and he was slowly, not accepted, but at least not completely ostracized. As a matter of fact, once Zabini had jumped in when Harry had been cornered by Weasley, Thomas, and Finnegan and managed to help him get out of harm's way. Harry wasn't sure if it was rule number one or what. They almost shook hands after that, but thought better of it. An uneasy truce had been established between Harry and Zabini. Harry wondered how long it would last.

The first week of classes proved to be entertaining at the least. The Slytherins had Quirrell first for Defense Against the Dark Arts. Harry, who had been looking forward to that class, quickly realized it was a joke. He doubted he would ever have a worse professor. Professor Quirrell's room smelled strongly of garlic, which everyone said was due to an encounter with a vampire in Romania who might someday return to seek vengeance. His turban was supposedly given to him as a thank-you present from an African prince for getting rid of a rather troublesome zombie, but the story sounded a tad far-fetched. For one thing, when Moon eagerly asked to hear the details of the story, Quirrell turned rather pink and began to discuss the weather, then dismissed the class early. Another strange trait of their defense professor was his turban, which seemed to smell rather... off. It

almost seemed to hold some strange sort of aura around it which both attracted and repelled Harry simultaneously. The popular theory was that garlic was stuffed into the turban to keep Quirrell protected at all times, but Harry couldn't help but think something else was going on with his new professor.

Harry went through the day as best he could. Trying to ignore the headache ravaging his mind and the disorientation that was associated with being unable to concentrate kept him from noticing small details. Like the fact that Malfoy, who was in front of him leading the Slytherins to class, had stopped.

So that's why he ran right into the back of Malfoy because he was just absently following the other Slytherins.

"Oi, watch where you're walking, Potty. This robe can't handle being touched by filth like you. I'll have to go wash it now."

"Well, maybe if your head wasn't so big, I wouldn't have bumped into you." Harry froze. Why did he say that?

The other Slytherins were discreetly taking note of the exchange, without actively paying attention.

Crabbe and Goyle cracked their knuckles in an attempt to be intimidating.

"I'd be careful if I were you. There are three of us and one of you. Can't you count?"

In for a knut, in for a galleon, as the wizards said. Harry kept up the banter with Malfoy, knowing he couldn't give in yet. "So get a few more guys and it will be a fair fight," Harry countered. A couple people snickered.

Malfoy glared and almost drew his wand. But Professor Sprout chose that moment to walk by, and as they were supposed to be heading to her class anyway, she chose to escort them the rest of the way. Thankfully only Slytherins had been present, or Snape would have had their heads.

Professor Sprout was a dumpy little witch who was head of Hufflepuff house. She taught them Herbology in the greenhouses

with the Ravenclaws, twice a week. They learned how to take care of all sorts of plants and fungi, and learned a variety of uses for them. The first class made them familiar with the different tools they would need and the basics of what they would learn in the class. They would need three partners, as a general rule, to work at each table. Malfoy, Parkinson, Crabbe, and Goyle were one group. Greengrass, Moon paired with a couple of Ravenclaws, as did Nott and Bulstrode, leaving Harry with Tracey Davis, Blaise Zabini, and a Ravenclaw, whose name was Mandy Brocklehurst. She had blond hair, bright blue eyes, and was very quiet. The remaining five Ravenclaws were all paired up together at one big table. Harry felt as if he had caused the disparity in numbers.

The next time they would be outside again would be on Wednesday nights, for Astronomy, and they'd get to stare up at the sky through their telescopes to record constellations, learn the names of stars, and study the movement of the planets.

The most boring class by far was History of Magic, which they had the next day with the Hufflepuffs. It was the only class taught by a ghost, Professor Binns, and Harry had the feeling history had changed since he died. Binns had been very old when he had fallen asleep in front of the staff room fire and left his body to teach his class the next morning. Rumor had it his teaching methods hadn't changed; only his appearance had. Binns droned on and on, and his lectures were more effective than a sleeping potion, as Harry soon discovered. No one in their class was able to resist the urge to fall asleep, and everyone soundly snored in tune with Binns' lecture.

A far more interesting class, Transfiguration, met in the afternoon on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and their teacher, Professor McGonagall, was not to be trifled with. The Slytherins had this class alone and Harry was immediately reminded of his impression that she was one professor you did not want to cross. She immediately gave the Slytherins a strict talking to before they were even seated in her first class about the dangers of Transfiguration. Her gaze rested a moment longer on Harry, and a sad smile seemed to appear on her face as she moved on to the rest of her speech.

"Transfiguration is some of the most complex and dangerous magic you will learn at Hogwarts," she said. "Anyone messing around in my class will leave and not come back. You have been warned." She gave one last look at Malfoy in particular before pulling out her

wand and changing her desk into a pig. Harry thought it rather resembled Dudley before it was turned back into her desk. After taking a lot of complicated notes, matches were handed out and they were told to turn it into a needle. Harry had been struggling with the spell, but when he wasn't paying attention, he managed to transfigure it perfectly. McGonagall happened to notice and awarded him three points. He also heard her mention something along the lines of "like James," but Harry was too surprised at his needle to make sense of it. By the end of the lesson, most of the purebloods (excluding Crabbe and Goyle) had made varying degrees of success with their matches, but only Daphne Greengrass, Malfoy, and Harry himself had actual needles, although Harry noticed Malfoy had merely switched his match with a real needle. McGonagall had noticed this too and docked him five points, while awarding Daphne three, and pointing out to the class how hers and Harry's had adopted a silver-like color and appeared pointy at the end.

Malfoy scowled and then correctly transfigured his needle.

Their last class of the day, Charms, was taught by Professor Flitwick, a tiny little wizard who stood on a pile of books to see above his desk. He took roll call at the start of class, and gave an excited squeak when he read Harry's name, before toppling off the books and out of sight. The Slytherins sniggered and Malfoy took the opportunity to curse Harry's name. Once Flitwick had returned to his considerably short height, they merely talked of the basics of Charms for the remainder of the class period and took notes before being let out.

Friday came along fairly quickly, and as Harry looked at his time table during breakfast, he noted that they were having double Potions with—

"The Gryffindors?" Malfoy exclaimed incredulously. "This should be good. Snape always favors us. Those Gryffindors won't know what hit them!" Malfoy looked around at his cronies, Crabbe and Goyle, and glared menacingly as his gaze rested on Harry.

"Snape is my godfather, Potter. So you better—"

"What, Malfoy? Not bug you?"

At that point, Hedwig flew towards Harry's table, fluttering down between the marmalade and the sugar bowl, and sending Draco's goblet towards his lap. The Malfoy heir was unprepared for this turn of events and cursed loudly, as he left the table glaring at Harry, muttering darkly. Harry cackled gleefully once he noticed the wet spot appearing on Malfoy's pants.

"That's a good girl, Hedwig," Harry said and grinned. "Have some bacon." Hedwig eagerly nibbled on the offered food after depositing her letter. He tore it open and a very tidy handwriting met his eyes.

Dear Mr. Potter,

I'm aware that you have Friday afternoons off and I would like to extend to you an invitation for tea and biscuits with myself and Hagrid in my office. There are a few details of significance I wish to discuss with you. Please send your answer back with Hedwig.

-Professor M. McGonagall.

Harry looked around but realized he had no quill. Reluctantly, he asked to borrow one from Moon.

"Here, Potter. And if you wish, you may call me Lily." She extended her hand with the quill, and Harry recognized she wasn't only offering him the quill, but her friendship also.

Harry grasped the quill and scribbled off a quick Yes, sending the answer off with Hedwig, and then offered the quill back to Moon.

"Thank you Mo— Lily. No— Moon. I can't call you Lily."

Moon grabbed the quill back somewhat angrily and Harry was surprised to see it burst into flames.

"And why bloody not, Potter?"

"It's my mother's name. It sounds too strange coming out of my mouth," Harry said honestly, surprised by his reluctance to use the name.

Moon couldn't seem to decide whether or not that was an appropriate answer. She settled for an exasperated sigh. "Fine then. As you were." And she walked away.

"Well brilliant, Potter, so long to your first possible Slytherin friend," Harry muttered to himself. To be completely honest with himself, he didn't know why he turned her down. It just felt strange, befriending Slytherins. He felt as if they always had an ulterior motive. At least, that was the stereotype.

Tea with Hagrid kept Harry sane for the day, as he entered his most interesting class of the week, Potions, with Professor Snape. At the sorting, Harry had gotten the impression Snape had disliked Harry. He soon realized he was wrong. Snape didn't dislike Harry— he hated him.

Their class took place in the dungeons near the Slytherin dorms. The classroom itself was a lot colder than the other classrooms, and the room itself gave off a creepy aura as it was with the pickled animals floating in glass jars all around the walls.

Snape, like Flitwick, started the class by taking the roll call, and like Flitwick, he paused at Harry's name.

"Ah, yes," he said softly, "Harry Potter. Our new— celebrity." His sarcasm-laced voiced reverberated around the walls of the classroom, and Slytherins and Gryffindors alike sniggered into their hands. Harry dearly wished he could Apparate. He also hoped Snape included himself in rule number one.

Snape finished calling roll and his black eyes swept the room, locking gazes with the students, each of whom broke the stare, except Harry, who maintained his staring contest with Snape. It seemed to be a battle of wills, but something in Harry refused to let him look away.

"You are here to learn the subtle science and exact art of potion-making," Snape began, his eyes still fixed on Harry's. His voice, little more than a whisper, captivated the entire class. Apparently, Snape also shared with Professor McGonagall the gift of keeping a class silent without effort. "As there is little foolish wand-waving here, many of you will hardly believe this is magic. I don't expect you will really understand the beauty of the softly simmering cauldron with its

shimmering fumes, the delicate power of liquids that creep through human veins, bewitching the mind, ensnaring the senses... I can teach you how to bottle fame, brew glory, even stopper death— if you aren't as big a bunch of dunderheads as I usually have to teach." His glare seemed to become more pronounced as he finished this sentence, and he broke eye contact with Harry. Silence met Snape's pronouncement. Hermione Granger was on the edge of her seat and looked almost desperate to prove that she wasn't a dunderhead.

"Potter!" said Snape suddenly, turning towards Harry with his patented sneer on. "What would I get if I added powdered root of asphodel to an infusion of wormwood?"

Hermione's hand shot up at once. Somewhere in Harry's mind, page ten of Advanced Potion-Making appeared, and the words Draught of Living Death floated to the top of his mind.

"The Draught of Living Death, sir?" Harry asked.

Snape ignored his question. His eyebrow rose slightly. "Are you asking me or telling me, Mr. Potter?"

"Telling you, sir."

"Where would you look if I told you to find me a bezoar?"

An image of Ron Weasley, poisoned, appeared in his mind, and a stone seemed to speak to him.

"In the stomach of a goat, sir, although I'm sure you have some in your cupboards as well."

The class seemed to collectively hold their breath. Harry Potter was going toe to toe with Severus Snape. The only person who seemed mildly annoyed was Hermione, who wished to answer a question herself.

"What is the difference, Potter, between monkshood and wolfsbane?"

Harry didn't know this one. Hermione's hand, if at all possible, seemed to stretch even higher into the air with renewed vigor. If

Harry didn't know better he would have thought she had cast an engorgement charm on her hand, because it seemed likely to touch the ceiling at any moment. Harry, whose eyes were still locked with Snape after all this time, was starting to get a headache again and felt ready to lash out. His inner Slytherin prepared to retort, a sarcastic comment on the tip of his tongue, and Harry let go.

"The name, sir," Harry responded, stating the obvious difference.

Snape seemed mildly impressed. "Weasley, what is Amortentia?"

Weasley froze, not expecting to be called on. His mouth was slightly open, and Harry almost thought he saw some sort of insect enter it. Hermione could no longer contain herself.

"Please sir; it's a love potion that—"

"Five points from Gryffindor for speaking out of turn, Miss Granger. Sit down," Snape snapped. "Do not interrupt when I am lecturing. Well? Why aren't you all copying this down?"

A sudden rummaging for various writing supplies was heard. Snape seemed like he was struggling with himself over something. Whatever it was, he finally settled it and returned to his class. He divided them all into pairs, and the class began working on a simple potion to cure boils. He walked around the room, his long black cloak billowing out behind him, making Harry mildly curious if he used magic to create that effect, and criticized everyone's potion except Malfoy's. Harry had been partnered with Zabini, and when Snape reached their table he again seemed to struggle with himself before he swept away to inquire as to exactly what kind of potion Weasley thought he was making, because it certainly wasn't the one assigned. At this point, clouds of acid green smoke and a loud hissing filled the dungeon. Neville Longbottom had somehow managed to melt Seamus Finnegan's cauldron into a twisted blob, and their potion was seeping across the stone floor, burning holes in people's shoes. Within seconds, the class was standing on their stools while Longbottom, who had been drenched in the potion, moaned in pain as angry red boils sprang up all over his arms and legs.

"Idiot boy!" snarled Snape, clearing the mess with a wave of his wand. "Why did you add the porcupine quills before taking the

cauldron off the fire? Have the standards of Gryffindor house sunk so low that their members can no longer read simple instructions?"

Longbottom whimpered somewhat pathetically as the boils appeared on his nose. "Take him to the hospital wing," Snape spat at Finnegan. He then rounded on Weasley and Dean Thomas, obviously looking for an excuse to dock points.

"Trying to make up for looking bad earlier, Weasley? Why didn't you tell him not to add the quills? Or can you not read either? That'll be a point from Gryffindor."

Weasley looked ready to fight and opened his mouth, but instead a sharp hiss of pain escaped. Thomas had kicked him. Malfoy seemed to be in high spirits, and Snape awarded him five points for "a perfect example of following instructions." Harry couldn't particularly complain, it was his house too, after all.

An hour later, the class was finally dismissed, and Harry's mind was going in circles. He still wondered what would have happened if he had been in Gryffindor. He went to lunch and ate alone, as had been his custom all week, and wandered the school before he would go meet Hagrid and McGonagall. He was beginning to wonder if Hogwarts really was that much different from the Dursleys. He knew that was a bit of an overstatement; he was well-fed here, but the treatment was just as bad, if not worse.

His feet eventually led him to McGonagall's office and he knocked twice. The door opened of its own accord and Harry was beckoned inside. McGonagall was seated behind her desk and Hagrid was seated to the side. Harry was motioned to sit and he took the nearest chair, before meeting McGonagall's eyes.

"Professor," he nodded respectfully, and gazed at her somewhat questioningly.

"Mr. Potter," she returned. "Have a biscuit." Harry accepted one and took an experimental bite. They were quite good so he contented himself with a second.

"Hello, Hagrid." Hagrid looked somewhat unpleasant, but at the same time he looked like he was trying to be cheerful. He was not very good at hiding his emotions. He simply looked miserable.

"So err- how do yeh like Slytherin, Harry?" Hagrid asked.

"It's—" A million thoughts flew through Harry's head, but he didn't know how to word any of them. "It's— an adventure," he answered truthfully. Before he knew it, he was telling Hagrid about his classes, and laughed when Hagrid referred to Filch as "that old git— err sorry Professor McGonagall." She gave a thin smile.

"An' as fer that cat, Mrs. Norris," continued Hagrid, "I'd like ter introduce her to me dog Fang sometime. D'yeh know, every time I go up ter the school, including today, she follows me everywhere? Can't get rid of her— Filch puts her up to it."

Harry chuckled. He considered telling them about Snape, but decided against it. Snape was his Head of House. He wouldn't complain about him, even if he did seem to hate him.

"Professor McGonagall, you said you had some details of significance to tell me?"

"Yes, Potter. Well, truthfully I had expected you to be in Gryffindor. I didn't expect this meeting to be quite so formal, and quite frankly somewhat awkward. I had merely wished to help accommodate you at Hogwarts. I— knew your parents, and well, Severus was never truly helpful to the Slytherin first years."

Suddenly, Harry's concerns about Snape came out of his mouth before he could stop them. "He really seems to hate me you know; Snape that is."

"Professor Snape, Harry."

"Right, him."

"That's rubbish Harry, why should he?" But Hagrid didn't quite meet Harry's eyes when he said that.

"Professor Snape— has a history with your parents Harry. You would have to ask him about that. It is not my story to tell," McGonagall said.

"Err— right. Thanks Professor." Harry neglected to mention his unofficial status as the outcast of Slytherin house. "Well I have some homework I need to work on, so I'd better go. Thank you for the biscuits."

"Of course, Potter," McGonagall answered briskly. She offered him one to take with him and as he reached for it he noticed a clipping from the Daily Prophet on the table. He glanced at the headline:

GRINGOTTS BREAK-IN LATEST

A quick glance showed that it had occurred on July 31: the same day he and Hagrid had been to Gringotts. It also said that vault in question had been emptied that same day, words that seemed to jump off the page.

Harry started to ask Hagrid about it, but thought better of it, nodded politely to McGonagall and Hagrid, then left the office.

As he walked back to the dorm, Harry remembered that Hagrid had emptied vault seven hundred and thirteen, if you could call taking that tiny package out of the vault emptying it. In any case, where was the package now? What was it? But the most pressing issue was something McGonagall mentioned: what happened between Snape and his parents?

Chapter 2: A Blonde, a Brunette, and a Redhead

Hogwarts seemed to change Harry's mindset about everything. His newest change in beliefs was related to people. He thought he would never meet someone whom he hated more than Dudley Dursley. But that train of thought changed when he was sorted into Slytherin house. He was having trouble deciding whom he hated more: Draco Malfoy or Ron Weasley. Malfoy was merely a pest, but a fairly large one who was successfully alienating Harry from Slytherin house, while Weasley prevented him from being liked by anyone else in Hogwarts. Hagrid even acted somewhat odd towards him, as if he was having trouble coming to terms with Harry being a Slytherin. He was really working on it, but Hagrid was never very good at keeping things to himself. As for his own Head of House, Professor Snape... well, Harry figured he had better luck with McGonagall. She seemed somewhat sympathetic, at least during the meeting.

Now he was faced with another dilemma: Gryffindor and Slytherin would be taking flying lessons together on Thursday, according to the notice in the common room. Malfoy and the Weasel together seemed to have enough inter house support to make Harry's social life non-existent. Blaise still acted somewhat neutral towards Harry, Moon was no longer speaking to him, and Greengrass seemed to have become quite enigmatic. Nott was fairly quiet and observant now and Davis would partner with Harry in a class or two, mostly Potions. Harry hated Potions because he had Snape, the Slytherins, and the Gryffindors, all of the people who hated Harry the most, together in one classroom. The walk to the dungeons felt like he was walking to his own personal Hell. If it weren't for rule number one, Slytherins take care of their own, and number ten, what happens in Slytherin stays in Slytherin, Potions would be completely impossible to attend. As it was, Slytherins would just subtly make him look bad, and then Snape would inevitably yell at him back in the Common Room and make him clean and other various punishments he would come up with. It wasn't too bad, Harry was used to the manual labor, but it was annoying always being singled out.

But flying, something he had been looking forward to, was now something he waited for with trepidation. It was constantly on his mind, because Malfoy was constantly complaining about first years not being allowed brooms and not being allowed to play Quidditch. Of course, once he was done complaining, his tone changed into a

rather boastful one, and Harry had to endure long, drawn out stories involving Malfoy escaping Muggles in helicopters. Harry would eat his hat if Malfoy had ever even seen a Muggle helicopter. When Harry could get out of earshot of Malfoy, he was treated to Weasley going on about almost hitting some hang glider. Harry wondered if he was lying, or if he was really that bad that he almost hit a hang glider. Of course, if Harry ever got close enough for Weasley to notice, he would just be sneered at and then the Gryffindors would turn their backs on him. After all, he was a Slytherin. What else did he expect? But part of that may have had to do with a couple days ago, when Harry came down to breakfast early and accidentally sat at the Gryffindor table. There were mostly only Ravenclaws up at the time, but Harry didn't realize he was in the wrong place until about ten minutes later, when some older Gryffindors subtly hexed him with minor pranking spells, like making his body itch or his food slippery. When it got bad, he realized he was at the wrong table and just walked out before anyone could say anything else. That had resulted in scrubbing the Potions room floor for "making Slytherin house look like a bunch of dunderheads."

Thursday morning rolled around and Harry heard Granger loudly go into her "lecture mode," as most of the school had called it, during breakfast, and then owls arrived. Harry sipped his orange juice and looked around. Malfoy, as usual, greeted his eagle owl who gave him sweets from home in return. Today's unusual owl recipient was Neville Longbottom. A barn owl dropped off a small package and he opened it revealing a glass ball the size of a large marble. It was full of white smoke, but when he held it tightly, it turned scarlet. Harry heard Malfoy mutter "A Remembrall? This could be fun," and watched as he stalked towards the Gryffindor table. Harry continued to watch as Malfoy snatched it from Longbottom, and then Weasley jumped to his feet, ready for a fight. Apparently, Weasley only allied with Malfoy when Harry was concerned. McGonagall quickly came to the rescue though, and sent Malfoy and his goon squad off as soon as the Remembrall was returned. Harry was a bit disappointed. He had rather hoped they would finish each other off. Harry wondered if he could still manage to instigate that particular battle...

As the time flew by for the flying lesson, far too quickly for Harry's liking, he found himself conversing with Daphne Greengrass. He had just left the Great Hall and found his path blocked by the black-haired girl.

"Potter."

"Errr— is there something wrong, Greengrass?" Harry asked, slightly taken aback.

"Follow me," she answered mysteriously.

Harry gazed intently at her blue eyes for a moment. After sensing nothing malicious, he shrugged and followed her to a secluded corner. She stopped suddenly and turned to face him. Well, she was more observing him, if that was the right word. Harry waited quietly but she still hadn't said anything, so he decided to break the silence and try to catch her off guard. He had learned in Slytherin that every conversation was a game, with one party trying to get as much information as possible while revealing as little as possible. It usually helped if you could catch the other person off guard, or spark their emotions, making them reveal something they hadn't originally intended.

"Were you fancying a snog or something?" Greengrass's nose wrinkled in distaste, causing Harry to smirk. "Really though, what did you need?"

"I've been watching you, Potter."

"You and the rest of the school. What's your point?"

"You seem to have little to no trouble casting spells. You always seem to be able to come out on top in a clash with Malfoy. You constantly inspire fear and respect in the Gryffindors simultaneously. You're not quite what you seemed the moment you walked up to the Sorting Hat. I underestimated you; and I never underestimate people."

"I still don't see your point," answered Harry, trying to get her to make her intentions clear.

"Just know that many people are watching you, Potter. You have a lot riding on this year. You turned a lot of heads when you were sorted into Slytherin. So now people don't know what to expect from you. The Gryffindors still think you're the next Dark Lord I'm sure, and some of the Slytherins may think you have potential. After all,

why would the Dark Lord want to kill a baby? Even more curious, why would he fail?"

"What made you to tell me this, Greengrass?"

"I'm just passing on a message. Just remember what I said." On that note, Greengrass walked away, leaving Harry with some interesting information to digest.

Three-thirty came and saw Harry dutifully trudge through the grounds on the way to the flying lesson, dejectedly. He had considered just ditching it all together, but something convinced him this particular lesson was a rather important one he wouldn't want to miss. The day, at least, was nice. It was clear, slightly breezy, and the grass seemed to ripple under his feet. Harry was the last one to arrive and he stood next to the last broomstick left lying on the grass. It looked like it had been through a storm. Harry was none too pleased by his current circumstances. Harry had heard the Moon twins note the horrible quality of the school brooms available; actually, they had been comparing the brooms to a rather horrid looking fifth year Gryffindor. Harry hoped they hadn't been serious. Apparently, they were.

At that point the flying instructor, Madam Hooch, had arrived. She had short, gray hair, and yellow eyes like a hawk.

"Well, what are you all waiting for?" she barked. "Everyone stand by a broomstick. Come on, hurry up."

Harry glanced again gloomily at his broomstick.

"Stick out your right hand over your broom," called Madam Hooch at the front, "and say 'Up!'"

"Up!" everyone shouted.

Harry's broom jumped into his hand before he had even shouted. As bad as his broom looked, it seemed to be anxious to be taken out for a spin. Harry noticed his broom was the first to react, and one of the few that did initially.

Madam Hooch then showed them how to mount the broom properly, without sliding off the end, and she walked up and down the rows

correcting their grip. Harry was delighted to hear that Malfoy had been doing it wrong for years. Anything that kept Malfoy's ego in check was good in Harry's eyes.

"Now, when I blow my whistle, you kick off from the ground hard," instructed Madam Hooch. "Keep your brooms steady, rise a few feet, and then come straight back down by leaning forward slightly. On my whistle — three — two—"

But the one never came. Longbottom, looking as nervous and jumpy as a rabbit hiding from a fox, pushed off hard before the whistle was blown.

"Come back, boy!" she shouted, but Longbottom was rising straight up like a cork shot out of a bottle— twelve feet— twenty feet. Harry saw his scared white face look down at the ground, saw him gasp, slip sideways off the broom and—

WHAM— Harry heard a thud as loud as the one Hagrid had made breaking down the door to tell him he was a wizard. It was accompanied by a sickening crack, reminiscent of a noise his own bones had made during his time with the Dursleys. Harry couldn't suppress a wince even if he had wanted to. Longbottom lay facedown on the grass, a tangled mess. The broomstick rose higher, and slightly left, and began drifting off lazily towards the forbidden forest and soon disappeared from sight.

Madam Hooch's face, now as white as the incapacitated first year, bent over him and gave him a quick analysis.

"Broken wrist," she muttered. "Come on, boy— it's alright, up you get."

She turned to the rest of the class, her gaze accusatory, and slightly suspicious.

"None of you are to move while I take this boy to the hospital wing! You leave those brooms where they are or you'll be out of Hogwarts before you can say 'Quidditch.' Come on, dear."

Longbottom, brave Gryffindor that he was, clutched his wrist, his face tear-streaked and slowly hobbled off in the direction of the

castle while Madam Hooch had her arm around him to keep him steady.

Malfoy and the Slytherins, sans-Harry, burst out laughing the moment Hooch was out of earshot.

"Did you see his face, the great lump?"

"Shut up, Malfoy," snapped none other than Parvati Patil.

Pansy countered Parvati's comment with one of her own. Harry looked on, disinterestedly, at this battle of wits between a pair of unarmed combatants.

Malfoy sparked his interest though, as he discovered Longbottom's Remembrall.

"Look! It's that stupid thing Longbottom's gran sent him."

Malfoy held it up. Harry, recognizing an opportunity to take Malfoy down a peg or two in the eyes of the first years, stared Malfoy down. Unfortunately, in his haste to take on Malfoy, he neglected to remember rule number one, a fact that would haunt him later.

"Give that here, Malfoy," Harry said quietly, his voice dangerously low. Everyone froze. Malfoy merely smiled nastily.

"I think I'll leave it somewhere for Longbottom to find— how about— up a tree?" The Remembrall suddenly turned a bright red.

"Looks like you've forgotten something, Malfoy." Malfoy ignored him and opted to leap onto his broomstick and take off into the air instead. He was hovering level with the topmost branches of an oak. He called out to Harry, challenging him. "Come and get it, Potter!"

Harry had no choice. If he backed down now, he would lose face with the Slytherins. He had to one up Malfoy. Naturally, he jumped on his broom and took off after him.

The second Harry was in the air he realized three things, one: flying was easy. Two: this wasn't the first time he'd been flying before. He instinctively knew it. And three: Malfoy didn't have a chance in Hell of getting out of this one with his pride intact. He heard a few gasps

as he turned his broomstick sharply to face Malfoy, heard Weasley hoping that he and Malfoy would just knock each other off their brooms and be done with it, and heard Thomas and Finnegan placing bets. Malfoy stared at Harry in shock.

"That's twice you've underestimated me, Malfoy." Harry wasn't the only one forgetting rules, apparently. "Let me assure you that you do not want to make that mistake again. Now hand over the Remembrall, or you'll be falling to the ground like Longbottom. Let me point out that you're a lot higher up than he was; not to mention you have a spoiled, arrogant arse, which is less able to cushion your fall than Longbottom's fat one."

"Oh yeah? Don't go threatening me, Potter. You don't know what you're getting yourself into," said Malfoy with an attempt at a sneer, although his voice quavered the tiniest bit.

In response, Harry merely shot his broom straight at Malfoy, almost instinctively, and then cut left, expecting Malfoy to dodge. He nicked Malfoy's arm holding the Remembrall. Malfoy looked very worried.

"No Crabbe and Goyle up here, Malfoy; no one to save your neck now. So what's it going to be?"

Malfoy, slowly but surely, had come to the same realization. Harry could have sworn he saw the light bulb go off in his head, but then, Harry held no respect for Malfoy. He wasn't sure if the blonde was capable of coming up with his own ideas.

"Catch it if you can, then!" he shouted. He threw the glass ball high into the air and streaked back towards the ground. Harry watched the ball as it traveled in a slow arc and leaned forward; pushing his broom for all the speed it could muster, pointing the handle down to head straight towards the earth and the falling Remembrall. He was racing the ball, but Harry could still accelerate. The wind began to whistle in his ears, he stretched out his hand— a foot from the ground he caught it and pulled his broom straight. He toppled gently onto the grass with the Remembrall in hand, but it was quickly taken from him by Weasley.

"Trying to steal Neville's Remembrall were you, Potter? I should have known the day we met that you were no good you slimy, good for nothing, Slytherin," Weasley spat, nearly hitting Harry with the

liquid projectile. Thomas and Finnegan cheered. But Harry had had enough. He wasn't putting up with Malfoy, and he sure as hell wasn't putting up with Weasley. It was time to make a statement. Harry drew his wand, and Weasley's was drawn as well. So, to Harry's chagrin, were the wands belonging to the rest of Gryffindor house, although somewhat slower. Harry noted Granger didn't draw hers. Probably didn't want to break any rules. Harry also noted that every wand was pointed at him. Sadly, no one from Slytherin was backing him up. Not that he expected it. These weren't great odds, and Slytherins valued self-preservation higher than helping someone, unless of course there was the potential for personal gain. However, Harry's predicament didn't seem to meet this criterion, so he was on his own. Although he would've thought rule number one helped him out. But his disregard for that rule meant he didn't have their respect. This was one situation he'd have to get out of on his own.

He thought of any spells he could use. Expelliarmus was the first spell that came to mind, remembering his dream. He wondered if he should be proactive or reactive. He figured he should at least take care of the biggest threat first. No sooner had he reached that conclusion then he saw Weasley open his mouth. So Harry yelled the first spell he could think of.

"Traitor!" yelled Weasley.

At the same time, Harry started his own spell. "Expel—"

"Finish that spell and you will be expelled, Mr. Potter." Harry turned, hearing that voice. Professor McGonagall was running towards them, yelling at the top of her lungs. The other Gryffindors quickly lowered their wands and all pointed their fingers at Harry.

"Never— in all my time at Hogwarts—" McGonagall was almost speechless with shock, and her glasses flashed furiously.

"Weasley! I can't believe you would do such a thing."

"What?" Weasley asked incredulously.

"You could have broken your neck trying to catch that Remembrall!"

"Wha— but Potter— an— and Malfoy—"

"Mr. Weasley, come with me."

"But, Professor, Ron didn't—"

"That's enough, Mr. Thomas."

"Ron was just—"

"Hush, Miss Patil. Now, Mr. Weasley."

Unable to believe his bad luck, Weasley stared at Thomas and Finnegan. Granger seemed to be giving him a look stating quite plainly, it's your own fault. Infuriated, when McGonagall had her back turned he chuckled the Remembrall at the Muggleborn. Harry simply stepped forward and caught the ball before it could cause Granger's face any harm. She stared at him strangely. Harry tossed it into the air and let it land in her waiting hands. He stuck his hands in his pockets and walked back to his broomstick.

"And Potter!" called McGonagall.

Harry looked up, hands still in his pockets, and met her gaze expectantly.

"I'll be having a word with Professor Snape about your actions today," she said.

That was it. It was all over. Harry was done for. Snape would be sure to expel him. He didn't have a prayer. He might as well begin to pack his things. Madam Hooch returned a couple minutes later and dismissed the class, so Harry headed down to his dorm room. He went to dinner later, once his belongings were all in his trunk, which hadn't taken much time, and sat down at the table morosely. He merely played with his steak and kidney pie, no longer hungry. He wondered what would happen to Weasley. McGonagall seemed to think he'd been the one flying the broom. Would he be expelled too then?

He looked up at the Head Table and Snape was looking angrily at Harry. Harry returned his gaze and saw Weasley walking back looking more excited than Harry had ever seen. Harry was rather suspicious and stood up to walk by him and hear his conversation. Malfoy, apparently, had the same idea. Harry caught the words

"seeker," "youngest," and "century." Harry could hardly believe the absurdity of it all. Weasley was going to be a seeker? After he, Harry, had been the one who had caught the Remembrall? It just wasn't right. At that point, the Weasley twins walked up and seemed to be regarding the youngest Weasley with a calculating gaze.

"You know, Fred, I reckon we might be able to admit he's our brother."

"Easy, George. We haven't seen him do anything yet. Don't be too hasty."

"Very true, oh brother of mine."

"We must wait and see if he lives up to the name Weasley," Fred Weasley said as he ruffled the hair of the now beet-red Ron Weasley before they walked away. At this point, Malfoy walked up as well.

"Weasley isn't much of a name to live up to, is it Weasel?"

Weasley, still red from his twin brothers, remained silent. Thomas and Finnegan came to his rescue.

"You seem more confident on the ground, Malfoy," Thomas observed.

"As if Weasley could've challenged me? That was all Potter and you know it. If Weasley as Seeker didn't mean that you all would be doomed to lose every Quidditch match this season, I would say something. But I'd take you on anytime, you blood-traitor. Tonight, if you want. Wizard's duel. Wands only— no Muggle fighting. What's the matter? Know you'll lose?"

"Of course not," replied Finnegan coolly. "I'm his second, who's yours?"

Malfoy looked at Crabbe and Goyle, sizing them up.

"Crabbe," he said. "Midnight all right? We'll meet you in the trophy room; that's always unlocked."

Harry watched as Malfoy left and stared after him. That was definitely an interesting turn of events. Maybe he would get his fight after all. He began to walk off but was called by Snape, who had been walking out of the Great Hall.

"Professor McGonagall spoke to me about your actions this afternoon, Potter."

Harry wondered what he should do. He had forgotten about Snape. Deny it all? But Harry couldn't decide what to say before Snape continued.

"I will be taking up your next two evenings for getting yourself cornered by a group of Gryffindors. Don't let it happen again. My office, tonight at seven. Don't be late. Now off with you."

Harry sighed, nervous about what Snape would make him do, and returned to his dorm. When six forty-five came, he headed down to Snape's office. He didn't mention the duel that might happen and instead made sure to just listen quietly and do whatever Snape said.

"You will be scrubbing cauldrons. No magic." He tossed a very beaten up rag to Harry who caught it deftly. A bucket of water was nearby with soap. Harry began his work, letting his mind wander.

"Snape sucks doesn't he?"

Harry jerked his head up, looking around. There wasn't a soul in sight, other than Snape, who was marking papers at his desk. A slight breeze of cold dungeon air brushed by Harry, but the sound seemed to have come from nowhere at all.

He shrugged it off and continued cleaning. There was no more appearance of the voice, and Harry was left to imagine where it had come from. Someone invisible? When eleven came, Snape sent Harry off, with the instructions to return tomorrow night at the same time.

He got back to his dorm and even though he was tired, waited until the duel that night so he could see Malfoy and Weasley beat the snot out of each other. He lay awake in his bed, his homework forgotten, and as midnight neared, he glanced over and noticed Malfoy was still lying in bed, asleep, and appeared to have no

intention of dueling Weasley. Harry debated between calling Malfoy on it, going back to sleep, and even warning Weasley, although the last option was quickly forced out of his mind. He chose the former instead.

"Malfoy," Harry whispered, nudging the blonde's shoulder.

He was fast asleep. A spell quickly made its way into Harry's head.

"Levicorpus," he thought, pointing his wand at Malfoy's resting body. The Slytherin was hoisted into the air, seemingly by his ankle, and cursed profusely at the invisible force attacking him.

"I thought you were dueling Weasley tonight, Malfoy? You too scared to duel him or what?"

"Potter," Malfoy growled menacingly. The effect was lost, however, because Malfoy was floating upside down in the air.

"I always knew you were too afraid to actually take any action. And here I thought you were a better duelist than the Weasel. I guess I was mistaken," Harry sighed, running a hand through his hair.

"I'm better than you and the Weasel put together."

"Oh, yeah? Well why don't you come with me to the Trophy room?" Harry asked.

"That's not going to—" But Harry had grown tired of Malfoy's excuses. With a swift 'liberacorpus,' Malfoy fell into a tangled heap on his bed.

"I'm gonna have to let Slytherin house know that you chickened out on a duel against a Gryffindor, one that you yourself suggested. Tut, tut Draco. I sincerely doubt our fellow Slytherins will take kindly to being embarrassed like that."

"Well they will when they find out that the person who is going to meet the Gryffindorks is Filch," Malfoy countered smugly.

Harry raised an eyebrow.

"Well, well, Malfoy actually showing some sense of cunning. I'm impressed, but easily so. Then again, it was the Weasel, so that

really takes away your credibility. I mean, come on, he's pretty thick, even compared to you, Malfoy."

"Well, Potter. As enchanting as this conversation is, I'm going back to bed. And don't even think of using your wand on me again. Stupid half-blood. You aren't worthy of holding a wand, let alone being a Slytherin. You shouldn't meddle in things that don't involve you. That's why your parents are dead and if you aren't careful you may meet the same fate." With that, Malfoy closed his curtains and left Harry standing in the middle of the dorm, enraged.

Surprisingly, no one else seemed to be awake. Harry, fuming, was about to return to sleep, but he had a brilliant, albeit reckless, (borderline idiotic in retrospect actually) idea. Malfoy had not only insulted him, but deprived him of his desire of seeing him and Weasley fight each other. Harry looked around and saw Malfoy's wand lying on the blonde's trunk. Harry wondered what would happen if Filch decided to go to the trophy room and found Malfoy's wand lying there. He looked around carefully before nicking Malfoy's wand and sneaking out of the common room. He headed towards the trophy room and didn't encounter any teachers along the way, thankfully, and made it to the trophy room in record time. He deposited the wand on the floor before he heard a loud crashing noise. Harry ran in the direction of the noise and seemed to be led along a seemingly random path. Then—

"STUDENTS OUT OF BED! STUDENTS OUT OF BED DOWN THE CHARMS CORRIDOR!" It sounded a lot like Peeves. Harry checked his surroundings. He was close to the Charms corridor, but not quite. He figured it was Weasley and his merry band of misfits who were busted. Harry turned a corner and saw Filch storming away from Peeves, looking distinctively angry. Harry looked down the corridor and realized he was in the forbidden corridor. He walked slowly towards the last door, the one that was off-bounds. Once he neared the door, it burst open, expelling Weasley, Longbottom, Finnegan, and Granger. He quickly ducked into a nearby corner so as not to be seen. Before doing so, he caught a glimpse inside the door of a three-headed dog, similar to the one he remembered at the opening feast. His name was Fluffy if he wasn't mistaken. Fluffy was such a ridiculous name for a three-headed monster though. Harry decided Hagrid had a hand behind the naming of the beast. The Gryffindors sprinted out of there. Harry shrugged and took a long walk back to the Slytherin common room. He was grateful that he encountered no

trouble on the way back. Before he went to sleep, he left a note for Malfoy, saying that he might want to get to the trophy room if he wanted his wand.

It wasn't until he woke up to Malfoy's enraged scream that he realized perhaps that wasn't the best idea. He had essentially declared war on the pureblood, and now Harry had opened hostilities. Malfoy sprinted to the trophy room, swearing profusely at Harry along the way, while Harry quickly changed and went to breakfast.

Malfoy eventually made it into the Great Hall, red faced and extremely pissed off. His mood worsened when he saw Weasley had managed to get out of being caught as well. Harry ate his breakfast by himself, left to wonder about the three-headed dog. He remembered the article about something trying to be stolen from Gringotts, and the words of Hagrid swiftly floated back to him: 'Yeh'd be mad ter try an' rob it. Gringotts is the safest place in the world fer anything yeh want ter keep safe— 'cept maybe Hogwarts.'

He suddenly found himself entertaining the idea that something was being guarded by Fluffy at Hogwarts. He resolved to ask Hagrid about it. It was times like these that Harry wished he had someone next to him to talk to. Sadly, Slytherin house didn't afford him the opportunity. About a week later however, he found someone who, although wasn't the ideal person to talk to, at least agreed with him over their mutual hatred of Weasley. But he knew that really, if he had bothered to wish for it.

The momentous occasion occurred during the morning post. Harry watched along with everyone else as six large owls flew in, carrying a long, thin package between them. The package deposited itself at Weasley's plate. Malfoy and Harry both came to the same realization almost instantaneously. They stood up and met Weasley across the entrance hall. Malfoy relieved Weasley of the package and examined it.

"That's a broomstick, Weasley, although if it's yours it may just be a Muggle broom. I doubt your family has enough money to buy a broomstick that can actually fly."

"It's a Cleansweep Seven. Better than your old Comet Two Sixty isn't it, Malfoy?" asked Finnegan.

Harry chose this moment to step in. "How does it feel knowing you aren't worthy of that broom, Weasley? You and I both know you're nowhere near good enough to be a seeker. That's definitely my area of expertise. I hope you don't mind losing in Quidditch. You know, Malfoy, I think the Chudley Cannons have a better chance of winning the league this year than Gryffindor if the best these idiotic lions can manage is a Weasel that doesn't even know what a snitch looks like."

Malfoy laughed, his previous hatred of Harry momentarily pushed aside to taunt the Gryffindors. "For once I agree with you, Potter. Twenty galleons say Weasley falls off his broom before the fifteen minute mark."

"I have to disagree, Malfoy. I don't think he'll make it past five." Feeling slightly vindicated, Harry walked away, laughing coldly. It was a bittersweet moment, because Weasley was still one up on him. Harry had no idea how McGonagall could have mistaken him for the redhead. He walked away slightly frustrated and prepared for class.

The first two months at Hogwarts had gone by in a blur. Even though he was still treated as an outsider, Hogwarts still felt more like home than Privet Drive ever had.

He was finally being taught more interesting material in his class, but surprisingly the spells came to Harry with ease. For example, on Halloween, when he was in Charms, Professor Flitwick divided them into pairs to let them work on making objects fly.

Harry was partnered with Greengrass and he couldn't help but remember her cryptic warning she had given him. Harry had continued to improve and was vying for top marks of the year with Hermione Granger, the annoying know-it-all Muggleborn. Harry wasn't the only one who found her annoying. Her own house seemed to hate her as well. Harry really couldn't understand why she was in Gryffindor. She was a Ravenclaw through and through. Then again, the hat had put him in Slytherin. So his argument was fairly nonexistent.

Harry looked up when he realized that the charm he was doing, "Wingardium Leviosa," which was supposed to make the feather

float in the air, had worked. Harry's feather floated in the air cleanly and seemed to be aloft under a particularly gentle breeze. Daphne whispered at him urgently.

"How did you do that? I didn't even hear you say the spell!"

"Excellent Mr. Potter," cried Professor Flitwick, clapping joyfully. Harry allowed a smug smile to grace his lips, even though inside he was a bit curious. He always seemed to accomplish great spells when he wasn't paying attention, or when he was feeling certain emotions, such as annoyance. The rest of class flew by and Harry's Transfiguration class seemed to go very quickly as well. As Harry headed through a crowded corridor on his way to the dungeons before dinner, someone knocked into him. He was about to yell at them to watch where they were going but he realized it was a girl— and he was startled to see that she was in tears. He looked down the hall from the way she came and his eyes caught a flash of red. Weasley. Of course.

"Oy! Weasley!"

The redhead locked eyes with Harry.

"You need something, Potter? Like a bloody lip? I'd be happy to provide."

"Idle threats, Weasley. I was just curious why a girl ran away from you crying. Did she get a good look at you and burst into tears from the horror?"

"What do you care? It was Granger. She probably noticed she hasn't got any friends. Most know-it-alls seem to have that problem."

The comment about not having any friends seemed to sting Harry. At one point he had counted Weasley as a friend, although it was all in the past. There was no way in hell he would ever be friends with Weasley. Not if he was also going to be a Slytherin. But the same comment could apply to him as well. If he truly thought about it, he didn't have any friends either. He pitied Granger to some extent. He didn't have too many interactions with her, since they only shared Potions together on Fridays, but if she didn't get along with Weasley there was still some hope for her. Although Malfoy didn't get along with Weasley either...

"You sound jealous that a Muggleborn is better than you, Weasley."

"I'm not a Slytherin, Potter. I don't think all Muggleborns are scum."

"When did I say that, Weasley?"

"You didn't have to. You're a Slytherin," Weasley said, assuming that his simple statement was proof enough. Thomas and Finnegan, both of whom were behind Weasley, nodded their heads fervently in agreement with Weasley's observation.

"I can't believe I ever considered you a decent human being, Weasley. You're blinded by your own ignorance and self-pity. You try to make yourself feel superior to other people. I guess that's why you never corrected McGonagall's assumption that you caught the Remembrall. I bet that made you feel loads better about yourself. Youngest seeker in a century wasn't it? I can't wait to see you get flattened in the first match against Slytherin."

Weasley's face turned redder than his hair.

Harry walked off, leaving him open mouthed and embarrassed. Thomas and Finnegan had no words for Harry.

Harry put the incident out of mind but it resurfaced on his way to the Great Hall for the Halloween feast. He overheard Parvati Patil and Lavender Brown saying that Granger was crying in the girls' bathroom and wanted to be left alone. The Halloween decorations put this out of Harry's mind again when he entered the Great Hall.

A thousand live bats fluttered from the walls and ceiling while a thousand more swooped over the tables in low black clouds, making the candles in the pumpkins stutter. The feast appeared suddenly on the golden plates, just as it had at the start-of-term banquet.

Harry had just begun to start on his baked potato when Professor Quirrell came sprinting into the hall, his turban askew and terror on his face. Everyone stared as he reached Professor Dumbledore's chair, slumped against the table, and gasped, "Troll— in the dungeons— thought you ought to know."

He then sank to the floor in a dead faint.

The Great Hall turned into complete, utter chaos. The students jumped from their seats and began running towards the doors, bumping into people and knocking them into the floor. Dumbledore, with a wave of his wand, sealed the doors and the students froze. Silence reigned as everyone stared fearfully to the Headmaster for guidance.

"Prefects will lead their houses back to the dormitories."

Stone came up to lead them towards the dungeons.

"Follow me," she said and the first years dutifully obeyed.

"Hey. Hey! HEY!" Harry yelled, progressively louder. The first year Slytherins stopped and looked at him.

"The troll is in the dungeons. I don't know about you but it may not be a good idea to head back down there," Harry said.

Some of the Slytherins stared at him as their eyes began to dawn in realization of what Harry told them.

"I know," Stone said. "We aren't going there."

She took them up the stairs, passed the Gryffindors, and Harry was inexplicably reminded of Granger. She was still in the bathroom as far as he knew. He again found himself in a position to save someone from Gryffindor house from getting in trouble. He thought back to the flying lesson and remembered she hadn't raised her wand. Just as Harry was reaching his inescapable conclusion he saw Snape heading passed them. He decided that as much as he detested the professor, he would at least let him know.

He broke off from the main group and followed Snape. He had slipped down a deserted corridor and Harry was forced to follow. He turned the corner and took off, calling Snape's name.

"Professor!"

But Snape either didn't hear him or chose to ignore him. He rushed after him along the next corridor and realized Snape was heading for the staircase to take him to the third floor when he turned the corner.

Harry found himself on the floor of the girl's bathroom. He decided he may as well let her know and get her out. He began heading towards the end of the passage when he first smelled it.

The foul stench of the troll was overpowering. It was a cross between Vernon Dursley's old mustard yellow socks and a public toilet no one ever bothered to clean. His ears picked up on it next. A series of low grunts and shuffling footfalls of enormous feet seemed to echo throughout the floor. The troll appeared, twelve feet tall, its skin a dull, granite gray, and its body resembling a boulder with a small bald head perched almost precariously on top, similar to a coconut. Its short, stumpy legs were thick as tree trunks with flat, horny feet extending outwards. Its gargantuan arms dragged a huge wooden club along the floor and the troll seemed mildly confused.

The troll peeked into the girl's bathroom and decided it would go exploring, shuffling its feet slowly into the room as a dopey grin spread across its face. Harry noticed the key was in the lock and he could lock it in, but a high, petrified scream threw that thought out of his mind. With no one else around Harry almost reluctantly entered the room to face the troll and get the Gryffindor out of there.

Harry walked in, pulling his wand out as he did, and the first thing he noticed was Hermione Granger. She was shrinking against the wall opposite him, looking as if she was about to faint. The troll was advancing on her, knocking the sinks off the walls as it went.

Harry figured his best plan was to get the troll away from her.

He picked up a tap and chucked it as hard as he could at the wall. It stopped a few feet from Granger. It lumbered around, blinking stupidly, to see what had made the noise. Its mean little eyes saw Harry. It hesitated, and then made for him instead, lifting its club as it went.

Harry ran around it towards Granger, who was against the wall, but instead went flying as the troll swung his arm at Harry, knocking him through a nearby stall.

Harry stood up and swayed on his feet. He made his way drunkenly to Granger.

"Get up!" he said urgently. "Get UP, Granger!" She continued to whimper in the corner, hugging the wall. He picked her up bodily from the floor, nearly dropped her, and was staring straight at the troll.

Harry's mind cycled through his options of different spells to use. The troll raised its club. Harry raised his wand.

"Reducto!" Harry cried, aiming not at the troll, but at the club. It shattered into pieces.

Granger sunk to the floor in fright. The troll swung its now broken club at them and Harry felt the whoosh of air around his neck. Harry reached to feel where he would have been hit and blood seemed to be flowing down his robes from his impact with the stall. The troll looked at them and blinked stupidly. Harry tried to think of a spell to knock the troll out at the very least. His mind provided the answer again. Harry didn't question where these spells came from, or how he knew them. He just accepted the fact.

"Wingardium Leviosa!" Harry yelled, unsure of how exactly this spell would help. To both his and Granger's shock, the troll floated into the air and its head drove into the ceiling. The troll howled in fury. Suddenly the door slammed open and loud footsteps made him look up into the eyes of Professors McGonagall, Quirrell, and Snape.

The shock forced him to cancel the spell and the troll fell to the floor, unconscious. Quirrell glanced at the troll, let out a faint whimper, and sat on the toilet, clutching his heart.

Snape bent over the troll. McGonagall looked furious. Her lips were white and seemed to disappear on her face.

"What on earth were you thinking?" said Professor McGonagall her voice cold and shaking with barely suppressed rage. Harry needn't have strained to hear her. Although her tone of voice was dangerously quiet, Harry heard every word. He knew she was beyond furious, and nearly incapable of speech. He was not going down for this though. This was Granger's fault. And he was going to make that very clear.

"You're lucky you weren't killed," she continued, her voice slipping into a tone that was slightly hysterical. "Why aren't you in your dormitory?"

Snape gave Harry a swift, piercing look. Harry quickly averted his eyes.

"I came looking for Granger, Professor. I assumed she had gone looking for the troll, it's a fairly Gryffindorish reaction you know, since I'm sure she believed she could take it on her own, having read about them. And being able to take down a troll would surely gain her respect with her fellow Gryffindor peers, who seem to resent her intelligence. When I came here, however, she was in the corner and had frozen up. Had I not arrived, she most likely would be dead. I tried to call Professor Snape, but he seemed in a hurry and couldn't hear me," Harry finished, lifting his eyes to stare at Snape.

He caught a look at Snape's leg, Snape's rather bloody leg, and quickly looked back to the floor before he revealed his understanding. Snape had been going to the third floor, but why?

"Miss Granger!" cried McGonagall. "Is this true?" Harry turned to stare at Granger. She seemed to be having an internal argument with herself, before looking down to the floor.

"Miss Granger, five points will be taken from Gryffindor. I'm very disappointed with you. If you're not hurt at all, you'd better get off to Gryffindor tower. Students are finishing the feast in their houses."

Granger left quickly. McGonagall turned to look at him.

"Well, Potter, I still say you were lucky, but that was very foolish, and very brave of you."

"Do not be assigning Gryffindor qualities to my Slytherin students, Minerva, no matter how much you wish they may have been in your house," said Snape, staring at McGonagall past the troll, still on the ground, but breathing.

"Potter, that will be," Snape's face contorted into a look of pain and hatred, "ten points from Slytherin for your lack of –" but what Harry lacked, he didn't hear, because his loss of blood had slowly started to affect him, and he swayed on his feet, before slowly falling to the

floor. The last thing he saw was the troll sneezing, covering Snape in troll boogers, a look of dignified disgust on the potions master's face. A smile graced his face for that instant before darkness overtook him.

Taking Malfoy's wand partially came from Big D's What Would Slytherin Harry do?

Chapter 3: Accio Trouble

When Harry opened his eyes, he was greeted by white walls, a clucking nurse, and a terrified Muggleborn.

"Ah, he's awake at last. Drink this," said the nurse, Madam Pomfrey, as she handed him a vial of potion. "Blood-replenishing potion, you lost quite a bit from that adventure of yours. Honestly, Trolls? How could you be so foolish, Mr. Potter? You're lucky you weren't killed. You're only a first-year!"

"Errr –" Harry compromised by downing the potion. Madam Pomfrey made an approving sort of noise and walked into her office. He noticed Granger staring at him, feelings of gratitude and hatred fighting to appear on her face.

"I suppose I owe you a thank you for fighting the troll, Potter," she said to the floor.

"I suppose you do, Granger."

"Why did you lie to Professor McGonagall?"

"You mean, more specifically, why did I blame it on you." It wasn't a question.

"Well– yes," Granger said, gaining a bit of confidence.

"I don't know if you've noticed or not, Granger, but I'm not exactly at the top of everyone's best friend list. My own Head of House harbors an intense hatred of me because of something that happened between him and my parents, my whole house isn't very fond of me at the moment either, and McGonagall has some plan of converting me into a Gryffindor. I wasn't going to go down in that situation, because simply put, I didn't have any reason to. I was doing you a favor and I wasn't going to get punished for it."

"I know how you feel, Po– Harry."

"Do you really, Granger? Do you? Go on then. How do I feel? No," Harry said, cutting her off as she opened her mouth, "never mind. You have no clue how I feel. You aren't some orphan here on your own, forsaken by people you considered friends, alienated by the

entire school, your abilities stolen by someone else and claimed to be their own."

"I do, you know," she said quietly after a few moments. "I try to fit in, help some of my fellow Gryffindors on their homework, who then turn around and claim it was theirs. I even consider them to be my friends, then find out that they laugh at me and make fun of me behind my back, sometimes even to my face. Everyone thinks I'm either too smart for my own good or worthless because I'm Muggleborn."

"Yeah, well, sorry. It wouldn't work out between us. You're a Muggleborn, I'm a Slytherin. That's the reality of it. I'm tolerated and somewhat respected by some of my house, even if they don't necessarily show it. If I'm seen with a Muggleborn, I'll be hard pressed to survive the rest of this year. If Weasley or Malfoy ever mess with you, well, I'll probably step in, because my hatred of them exceeds anything else, but I wouldn't consider us friends for now."

Granger's eyes began to tear up a bit. She brushed them away furiously and glared at Harry. "So that's it then. I come here to try and be your friend and you're just going to push me away? Like that?"

Harry remained impassively silent.

Granger took one more look at him and stalked out. "By the way," she called to him when she was at the door, "I was willing to lie to cover for you even if you hadn't said anything." She turned around and closed the door behind her, leaving Harry to Madam Pomfrey's excellent, although somewhat intense, care. Harry regretted losing her company, but really couldn't afford to have a Gryffindor Muggleborn friend at the moment.

The cold November wind heralded the coming of Quidditch season. Today, Slytherin would be playing Gryffindor. Harry was waiting to see Weasley get stomped to the ground. Somehow, Weasley was still the Gryffindor Seeker, and Harry was hoping that today would bring an abysmal performance by the redhead, which would be the opportunity to get even with the Weasel.

Breakfast went by very quickly and Harry already found himself in the Quidditch stands supporting his fellow Slytherins. After a couple

of restless minutes, during which Blaise kept Harry entertained by discussing his predictions of the match to anyone who would listen, the two teams finally flew onto the pitch. At Madam Hooch's whistle, fifteen brooms flew into the air. The quaffle was tossed into the air, and the game began.

"And the quaffle is taken immediately by Angelina Johnson of Gryffindor— what an excellent Chaser that girl is, and rather attractive, too—"

"JORDAN!"

"Sorry, Professor."

Lee Jordan's enthusiastic commentary, closely watched by Professor McGonagall, was keeping the crowd highly entertained. The non-Slytherin crowd anyway. Lee wasn't exactly unbiased. However, Harry was tuning him out, focused on finding the snitch from the stands. The game lacked excitement, and the two Seekers, Higgs and Weasley, really were horrible. Harry watched as Slytherin continued to resort to dirtier tactics to try and win the game. They had slowly begun to pull ahead as one of Slytherin's Beaters had knocked out one of the Gryffindor Chasers with a rather questionable move that elicited roars of outrage from the other three houses. However, Madam Hooch had missed it, so instead Gryffindor was forced to play a Chaser down. Slytherin steadily began to mount a higher lead and Harry had already twice seen the snitch, but Higgs and Weasley were oblivious to it all.

As Harry's frustration grew, so did the lead Slytherin maintained over Gryffindor. Slytherin took an overwhelming one hundred and seventy point lead by the time the Gryffindor Chaser was able to re-enter the game. Harry heard Wood call to Weasley, telling him under no uncertain circumstances to only catch the snitch when the Gryffindors were down by less than one hundred and fifty. Otherwise they would lose the game.

Of course, as luck would have it, the snitch made an appearance a minute later. The Slytherins were still up one hundred and sixty, as the rejuvenated Gryffindor offense had pulled one back. Higgs and Weasley raced each other to the snitch and Wood yelled for Weasley to prevent Higgs from getting it but to wait till they scored. Weasley didn't hear him. He and Higgs jostled each other to try and

grab the snitch and Weasley's troll-sized arms somehow enabled him to grab the snitch before falling face first on the ground.

The Gryffindor team let out groans while the Slytherins cheered. They still won a victory, although Blaise could be heard muttering about the loss of a hundred and fifty point lead. The crowd began to disperse. Higgs, although dejected from missing the snitch, seemed somewhat cheerful. Harry called out at him.

"Higgs! You should have had that snitch ten minutes ago. I saw it on the field no less than three times! How did you let a first year beat you?"

Many members of the crowd stopped, as did most of the professors. Snape in particular looked on interestedly, as did Professor Quirrell. Higgs was outraged. Marcus Flint, the captain, seemed somewhat pensive, a rather unnatural look on his face.

"Seekers duel. Right now," Higgs called back. Snape motioned for the other teachers to remain where they were. Slytherin house would deal with its own. Most of the Slytherins stayed behind to watch. Members of the other houses seemed hesitant to leave but some still made the trek up to the castle because of the cold.

Harry walked towards Higgs menacingly. Weasley stared at the two of them. His twin brothers grabbed him and hauled him off the pitch. In an uncharacteristic move, Fred offered Harry his broom, while George pried the snitch from Ron's hands. As they passed Flint, whose hand was extended, the snitch was placed grudgingly in his hands by George. The trio of Weasleys seated themselves to watch.

"We are all aware of the rules of a Seekers duel," Flint stated. "First to catch the snitch wins," Flint paused for half a second, "not only honor, but the position of Seeker on this Quidditch team."

Higgs nodded tersely. Harry let his head incline slightly to indicate his agreement.

Flint released the snitch.

"You will start in ten seconds," he said. The time seemed to last an eternity. "Go," Flint cried and both Harry and Higgs rose into the air. Higgs, with the superior broom, immediately flew in the direction he

believed the snitch to have headed. Harry took a second to become accustomed with the handling of the broomstick, and then looked around for the snitch. Higgs had flown into the sun, so any gold reflections Harry could see in that direction could be written off as the glare. Harry decided to have some fun. So, without warning, he took a dive towards the middle of the pitch. Higgs spun around and flew after Harry, thinking he had already found the snitch. Harry waited for Higgs to catch up to him, and began to reach his hands out, as if to grasp something. Harry heard Higgs curse and push his broom faster. As they neared the ground Harry pulled up, leaving Higgs nowhere to go but straight into the earth.

Harry was left with an unobstructed view of the pitch and quickly discovered the snitch, to his amusement, floating near Ron Weasley. Harry put on a burst of speed and flew straight at the redhead. Ron gave a very unmanly shriek and jumped backwards while Harry calmly put his hand out and closed it around the snitch. He hopped off the broom and tossed it back to Fred in one fluid motion with a curt nod in the Beater's direction, before heading back to Flint and handing him the snitch.

"Practice tomorrow morning at eight, Potter," Flint answered, a tone of anger mingled with incredulity and a touch of curiosity. Harry nodded and walked off. As he made it outside the gates he ran into Hagrid.

"Hello, Hagrid."

"Harry, that was a nice catch you made righ' now. D'you think you're on the team?"

"I think so Hagrid," Harry answered, following Hagrid to his hut. Hagrid poured him a cup of tea.

"Professor Snape didn't seem right too pleased to see you challenge the other Seeker like that, Harry." Harry remembered the three-headed dog and thought he may as well ask Hagrid about it.

"Professor Snape has a lot of problems right now. Do you know, Hagrid, Snape tried to get past the three-headed dog on Halloween?" Hagrid spit out the tea he had been drinking.

"How do you know about Fluffy?"

"Fluffy? Why would you give something like that a name like Fluffy?"

"Yeah— he's mine—bought him off a Greek chappie I met in the pub las' year—I lent him to Dumbledore to guard the—"

"Yes?" Harry asked eagerly, but then shut up quickly because he realized he had ruined his chance.

"Now, don't ask me anymore," Hagrid said. "That's top secret, that is."

"But Snape's trying to steal it, Hagrid."

"Rubbish, Snape's a Hogwarts teacher; he'd do nothin' of the sort."

"Then why did Snape's leg have bite marks from Fluffy on it?"

"I'm tellin' yeh yer wrong, Harry. I don' know why Snape had bite marks or anything like that but he wouldn't try ter steal it. Now listen to me, Harry. Yer meddlin' in things that ought not to be meddled in. It's downright dangerous. You leave it alone. What Fluffy is guarding is between Professor Dumbledore and Nicolas Flamel—"

"Aha!" Harry exclaimed triumphantly. "So there's someone named Nicolas Flamel involved is there?"

Hagrid looked furious with himself.

"Yeh need ter get back ter the castle Harry." So back to the castle Harry went, with his newly discovered information.

"All in all," Harry thought, "the day had gone by well." Harry was Slytherin's new Seeker, he'd come one step closer to solving the mystery of the third-floor corridor, and Slytherin had beaten Gryffindor.

There was only one word to describe Harry's first Quidditch practice: impossible. All the Slytherins on the team were bitter because he had replaced Higgs and so they chose to take it out on him. The conditions couldn't have been worse; Harry's breath froze in the air and he could have sworn it turned into ice. The rain was pelting against his skin and Harry's arms were numb. To top it off, the two

Slytherin beaters, Bole and Derrick, had taken to using Harry as target practice. Twice Harry only managed to stay on his broom by a combination of dumb luck and accidental magic. The first, he had been by the stands when the bludger flew at him, and Harry performed a sloth roll and his hand slipped, but he caught himself on the railings long enough to right himself. The second time Harry moved right to dodge but his body flipped over the broom and he had his legs wrapped around the broom, while his body was completely upside down. Finally, because Severus Snape was by no stretch of the imagination Minerva McGonagall, Harry was not fortunate enough to have a new broom like Weasley. He was stuck with an old Shooting Star at the moment, which meant Harry had the worst broom of the lot, and only sheer determination allowed him to even survive the practice.

As he trudged back into Hogwarts he was almost accosted by Filch. Dripping wet, Harry backed into a corner, hiding from the psychotic caretaker. He just managed to escape the madman's clutches and sprinted to the dungeons to shower and change.

Harry's next month was miserable. The only bright spot had been a stroke of unintentional brilliance from Blaise Zabini. Harry had been eating breakfast one morning when Zabini had an owl from a mail-order Quidditch supply service. Harry borrowed it from him and sent Hedwig off with instructions to buy a Nimbus Two Thousand.

So when mid-December brought several feet of snow, Harry was more excited than normal because his Nimbus Two Thousand arrived in the mail as well. His nights of being sore from twisting and turning to avoid bludgers on the Shooting Star were no more.

Harry persevered through Potions class, putting up with the freezing temperature, and enjoying the fact that Davis was being somewhat nice to him, even going so far as to politely ask for the powdered spine of lionfish which Harry had been measuring. He merely ignored Malfoy's attempts to make fun of Harry's not having a proper family.

Harry really wasn't that concerned about not having his own family. He had lived with it for so long it made no difference. He would be staying at Hogwarts over the holidays, having signed up the moment Snape came around with the list. Sadly, Weasley was staying as well, but he could only hope for so much.

As Harry left Potions he found himself walking alongside Granger. Weasley was farther ahead and walking right into a giant fir tree.

"Potter," she said curtly, with no trace of emotion in her voice.

"Granger," Harry returned somewhat cordially. Harry had a sudden inspiration. Normally, he wouldn't confide anything in Granger. They weren't exactly friends. But she owed him one. May as well call it in now. Besides, who was she going to tell?

"Granger," Harry began, "Do you remember that dog you lot ran into towards the beginning of the school year?" Harry queried, lowering his voice. Granger looked at him with eyes wide, and then Harry watched her face form into a shocked expression.

"You saw us?" she asked shrilly. Harry stuck a hand over her mouth and dragged her into a nearby corridor, just as he saw Malfoy taunting Weasley about being a keeper, or something like that. Harry didn't quite make it all out.

"Yes," Harry hissed. "But keep it down would you? I saw you all burst out of the room after Malfoy ditched Weasley for that duel. I also saw it was standing on a trap door. D'you have any clue what it's guarding?"

"No," she said quietly. "Do you?"

"Somewhat. Hagrid let slip that it has something to do with Dumbledore and Nicolas Flamel."

"Flamel... Flamel... I've never heard of him," Granger said, biting her lip.

"I know I've heard of him before but I can't imagine where. And I also know that Gringotts was robbed the same day Hagrid emptied a vault there. It was a very small package, and my guess is it's the same thing Fluffy is guarding."

"Fluffy?" she asked incredulously.

"Yes, I know. Hagrid is one for irony. Just find out what you can about this Flamel bloke. You always seem to be in the library as is.

Unless you're trying to discover Madam Pince's secret desire and I have the greatest sympathies if you do, because honestly, that woman is just downright obsessive when it comes to those library books. Defacing and vandalizing works of art? Seriously, I was just doodling in the margin of my textbook... Potions no less..." Harry trailed off, recalling a rather horrific episode in the library. Madam Pince had swooped in ready to kill. He had only been reading his Potions text and had drawn a stick figure trying to drown Snape in his own cauldron. What's wrong with that?

Granger let out a snort, which surprised the hell out of Harry.

"What exactly were you drawing, Potter?"

"I was drowning Snape in a cauldron," Harry said proudly.

"Snape's a professor, Potter. You shouldn't be doing that!"

"Now you think all professors are saints or something. Just so you know, Snape tried to steal whatever the bloody dog is hiding."

"Watch your mouth, Potter. And Professor Snape wouldn't do that. He's a—"

"Teacher, I know, I heard you the first time," interrupted Harry. "But he did. I saw him that night with the troll with a big gash in his leg from where the dog must've bit him. And I saw him heading towards the third-floor corridor before I went in the bathroom."

"I don't know," she said slowly.

"Well I'm not trying to convince you," Harry snapped. "Just find out what you can about Flamel, ok?" he asked, somewhat cooler than he intended.

"Alright but I'm going home for the holidays soon so I don't know how much help I'll be."

"That's fine, just keep me posted. And don't tell anyone you talked to me about any of this. You still owe me from the troll." Harry turned around and walked off.

"Potter!" Granger called. Harry turned around. He gave her a quizzical look.

"Happy Christmas," she said. His questioning glance turned into an incredulous stare. She seemed to flush under his gaze.

"Happy Christmas, Granger," Harry replied and walked off.

Before Harry knew it, Christmas Eve was upon him. He went to sleep in his dorm that night not expecting much. Malfoy had been lying low as of late and hadn't antagonized Harry at all, possibly because he was the new Seeker and he didn't want to ruin their chances. Harry really didn't know. Malfoy hadn't been doing a whole lot to Harry, beyond some juvenile pranks like an itching hex on his robe or a switching spell on some of his books. Harry thought Malfoy just wasn't very good at this whole revenge thing or he was planning something big. He made sure to stay on his guard either way.

Harry was always able to sleep safely because in Slytherin, each bed's curtains seemed to be shielded. The House of Slytherin tended to be a bit vengeful at times, but as long as your curtains were closed, there was no harm that would befall you. That's what Harry surmised at least. Harry discovered this one night when Crabbe and Goyle attempted to do something to Harry during the night. He had woken up to hear them stupidly muttering to themselves and had heard them cast a spell but it had reflected back on them. He had merely opened his curtains and stared at them. But he closed them again and had returned to sleep. The incident never occurred again. As for now, he just went to sleep glad that he was one of the only Slytherin first years still at Hogwarts for the holidays.

Christmas day, Harry finally awoke, more than likely due to Nott's triumphant shout as he opened a present, and to Harry's shock there were presents lying at the foot of his bed.

"Would you look at that? I've got some presents," Harry marveled. Zabini and Nott snorted.

"No... Really, Potter? Why should you have presents? It's Christmas," Blaise said sarcastically.

"And a Happy Christmas to you too," said Harry with a grin as he reached towards his small stack of presents.

The top parcel was wrapped in thick brown paper and scrawled across it was To Harry, From Hagrid. Inside was a roughly cut wooden flute. Hagrid had obviously whittled it himself. Harry blew it—it sounded a bit like an owl.

A second, very small parcel contained a note.

We received your message and enclose your Christmas present. From Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia. Taped to the note was a fifty-pence piece.

"That's friendly," Harry said to himself. He wondered what prompted them to give him a Christmas present this year. It wasn't like they had a tradition of giving him Christmas presents. Harry chose to not let it bother him. Although he was curious as to what message they were referring. Harry didn't recall writing them a letter.

Harry's next present was a large box of Chocolate Frogs from Grang—Hermione— and he felt immediately guilty. He hadn't gotten her a present. He didn't really know why she got him something anyway. Oh well. He decided to get her a book of some sort.

The next present Harry noticed was rather small. He picked it up and held it in his hands, before opening it slowly. It was a quill from Moon. Harry chuckled, remembering the day he had to borrow a quill. He decided he would try to befriend her, even though he was the most popular kid in the school— popular as in widely known and equally widely hated anyway.

His final present was very light. He opened it and something fluid and silvery gray went slithering to the floor where it lay in gleaming folds. Nott and Zabini were too busy stuffing themselves with candy and opening other various gifts to notice.

Harry picked the shining, silvery cloth off the floor. It was strange to the touch, like water woven into material. Harry realized it was a cloak. Immediately, his mind told him it was an invisibility cloak. He quickly hid it from view of the other Slytherins. A note fell out of the folds and Harry seized the letter. Written in narrow, loopy

handwriting, at once both familiar and totally unknown were the following words:

Your father left this in my possession before

he died. It is time it was returned to you.

Use it well.

A very Merry Christmas to you.

There was no signature, but somehow Harry knew it was from Professor Dumbledore. He also knew this cloak was one of his most prized possessions. Harry resolved to keep it on his person at all times.

Christmas dinner was amazing. It was unlike anything Harry had ever had in his entire life and he felt he had easily gained ten kilos. A hundred fat, roast turkeys; mountains of roast and boiled potatoes; platters of chipolatas; tureens of buttered peas; silver boats of thick, rich gravy and cranberry sauce—and stacks of wizard crackers every few feet along the table. The party favors were fantastic and Harry had a blast. He opened one with Moon and the cracker went off like a cannon, engulfing the laughing pair in a cloud of blue smoke, while from the inside exploded a rear admiral's hat and several live, white mice. Dumbledore had swapped his wizard's hat for a flowered bonnet and was chuckling merrily at a joke Professor Flitwick had just told him. Harry caught Dumbledore's eye and mouthed a silent thank you in his direction. Dumbledore merely allowed an innocent expression to cross his face momentarily.

Flaming Christmas puddings followed the turkey. They were equally mouth-watering. Up at the High Table, Harry watched Hagrid getting redder and redder in the face as he called for more wine, finally kissing Professor McGonagall on the cheek, who, to Harry's amazement, giggled and blushed, her top hat lopsided.

When Harry finally left the table, his hands were laden with various prizes from the crackers, such as his own wizard chess set. The white mice had long since vanished, more than likely off to become Mrs. Norris's dinner.

Back in the dungeons, Nott offered to help Harry break in his chess set as they taught him how to play. He was surprised Nott was being polite, but took it in stride. He decided Malfoy not being there might have had something to do with it. Wizard's chess was a lot different from regular chess because the pieces actually destroyed each other. Harry was beaten soundly by Nott, who let a smile grace his lips.

It had been by far the best Christmas Harry had ever had. Something had been nagging at the back of his mind all day though and it was when he returned to the comfort of his bed that he remembered it: the invisibility cloak. Once Zabini and Nott had fallen asleep, Harry pulled the cloak out from its hiding place under his bed.

His father's... this had been his father's. He let the material flow over his hands, smoother than silk, light as air. Use it well, Dumbledore had said.

Harry was curious as to Dumbledore's motives behind returning him the cloak. Surely this would aid Harry in getting into more trouble, and sneaking out of it. Harry had to try it though.

He slipped out of bed and wrapped the cloak around his thin frame. Looking down at his legs, only moonlight and shadows met his gaze. It was a very funny feeling.

Use it well.

Harry felt wide-awake. The whole of Hogwarts was open to him in this cloak. Excitement flooded through him as he stood there in the dark and silence. He could literally go anywhere his feet chose to take him. Filch would be none the wiser.

Harry crept stealthily out of the dormitory, up the stairs across the common room, and through the entrance to the Slytherin dorms. He didn't really have a clue as to where to go. He supposed he could search in the library for Flamel. Grang— Hermione wasn't here to research the man. That reminded Harry; he still needed to get her a present. Harry decided he had nothing better to do, so to the library he went.

The library was pitch-black and very eerie. Harry lit a lamp to help read the titles off the names of the books. The lamp gave off the

impression that it was floating in mid-air, and even though Harry knew his arm was there supporting it, it was still quite creepy.

Harry began to read through various books but Flamel was not among them. Harry knew he had read the name before but hadn't the faintest idea where. A few hours passed before Harry dared to enter the restricted section.

He tip-toed to the back of the library and gingerly stepped over the rope separating this section from the rest. The books had a very dark aura surrounding them. He looked through the books, looking for something to give him a clue, but none of them were willing. The titles didn't reveal much about them. Harry didn't even know what language they were in. A large black and silver volume looked promising. He pulled it out with difficulty, due to the immense weight of the book, and let it fall open on his knee.

A piercing, bloodcurdling shriek split the silence— the book was screaming. Harry stumbled back, breaking the lamp and casting himself back into the darkness. Harry shut the book at once and stuffed it back where he got it. The shriek refused to go away quietly. The noise reverberated throughout the library on the one quivering note. Harry panicked the moment he heard footsteps and ran for it. Filch was standing at the entrance to the library and Harry snuck under his outstretched arm, watching Filch's wild eyes, a manic gleam in them, stare right through the cloak.

Harry sprinted away as fast as he could while remaining invisible and found himself next to a suit of armor. It was then Harry realized he was lost. He had no idea where he was. The only suit of armor he remembered was near the kitchens somewhere. Harry looked both ways, trying to decide the best route to take, when a voice broke the silence.

"You asked me to come directly to you, Professor, if anyone was wandering around at night, and somebody's been in the library— Restricted Section."

Harry's blood ran cold. Filch! How had he gotten to Harry's location so quickly? He must have known a shortcut because the voice was getting nearer. Harry's night went from bad to worse when he heard the new voice speak.

"The Restricted Section?" asked a smooth, silky voice that Harry was used to hearing say 'five points from Slytherin, Potter, and quit making me take points off my own house.' No, being caught by Snape was out of the question. But Snape was determined to try, as Harry heard him say: "Well, they can't be far, we'll catch them."

Harry saw them turn the corner and he backed away slowly. The only escape route that presented itself was an empty classroom to his left. Harry squeezed through it, holding his breath and sucking in his skin to keep from touching the door at all, and to his relief his thin body managed to squeeze through without a sound. Harry watched as they walked straight past the room and he let out the breath he had been holding.

Harry allowed his attention to return to the room he was in. Many different desks were piled against the walls, along with some chairs tossed about haphazardly and an upturned wastepaper basket—but propped against the wall facing him was something that was much too out of place for an unused classroom.

It was a magnificent mirror, as high as the ceiling, with an ornate gold frame, standing on two clawed feet. There was an inscription carved at the top: *Erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi*.

Curiosity getting the better of him, Harry approached the mirror hesitantly. He wanted to look at himself in the mirror without seeing his reflection; it would look cool with the invisibility cloak on. He stepped in front of it.

What Harry saw made him both very pleased and very scared. He saw himself reflected in the mirror, which shocked Harry to no end. He had thought being invisible prevented his reflection from appearing. But the reflection the mirror showed was strange. Harry saw himself, smiling and happy, a face he rarely made these days. Everything seemed the same except for his eyes. Harry looked at them closely and they flashed a brilliant scarlet that made Harry jump back. He shook his head, as if to clear it, and looked back into the mirror.

This time, Harry saw himself in robes of gold and scarlet, smiling and laughing with a group of redheads. He quickly turned around and grabbed at the empty space behind him, half-expecting an

invisible person, but there was no one. These people only existed in the mirror.

One of the redheads, a small girl, was holding his hand and laughing shyly. Harry thought that it was the Weasley's, but he didn't know why they would be happy next to him. Harry looked at one of the twins, Fred, and suddenly felt a deep, heart-wrenching sadness that he couldn't explain. He broke eye-contact with the mirror.

Harry left the mirror that night but the next night he couldn't sleep. He decided to return one last time to the mirror, just to see himself looking happy. He put on the cloak and made it through the halls swiftly. He strode straight into the room and approached the mirror.

Harry looked into the mirror. He knew right away what he was looking at; it was his family. His mother, her eyes the same color green as Harry's own, and his father, with similarly messy black hair and identical glasses, both with their hands reassuringly on his shoulders and smiling at him.

"So I see you've discovered the Mirror of Erised, Harry," said a voice.

Shocked, Harry spun around and looked into the twinkling eyes of Albus Dumbledore.

"I— I never realized you were here, sir."

"Strange how nearsighted being invisible can make you," said Dumbledore, his eyes twinkling like mad.

"But," Dumbledore began, "what prompted you to return, Harry?"

"How did you know—?"

"I don't need a cloak to become invisible," said Dumbledore gently. "Now, I trust you realize what the mirror does?"

"I don't know, sir. I've seen three different reflections. Tonight, it was my parents. But last time, I saw myself with the Weasley family looking very happy and cheerful, but all the Weasleys hate me so that one didn't make sense."

"And the last one," Dumbledore prodded gently, his eyes twinkling crazier than ever.

"The first one actually," Harry began. "It was my reflection, smiling and looking cheerful." Harry left out the minor detail that his eyes had been flashing scarlet. Dumbledore's maddening twinkle finally dropped to a more manageable level.

"That's very interesting, Harry. You see, the happiest person on earth would be able to use the Mirror of Erised as a normal mirror, that is, he would see himself exactly how he is. Does that help?"

"It shows us what we want then," Harry said slowly, testing the words on his tongue.

"Yes and no," Dumbledore said quietly. "It shows us the deepest, most desperate desire of our hearts. I can only explain part of what you have seen, Harry. Your parents, whom you have never known, are shown standing around you. As for seeing the Weasleys, I can only imagine that you had wished to not be alone and wanted friends. What precisely was the order of these reflections, Harry?"

"My normal reflection, then the Weasleys, then my family," Harry responded.

"I see. I presume then that when you first encountered the mirror you were highly pleased with yourself and extremely happy, for whatever reason."

"I had just escaped Filch and Professor Snape— errr," Harry looked at the headmaster questioningly. He wasn't sure if he would get in trouble for that. Dumbledore's maddening twinkle returned with a vengeance.

"And then you felt the euphoria die down and you realized, subconsciously of course, that you desired close friends. As to the Weasleys, I can only hazard a guess that you were at one time good friends?"

"Something like that," Harry muttered darkly.

"And finally, your parents. You, who have never known your family, see them standing around you. However, remember that this mirror

gives us neither truth nor knowledge. Men have wasted away in front of this mirror, or been driven mad by it, wondering if what is shown is true. The mirror will be moving to a new home tomorrow, Harry. I ask that you not seek it out. If you ever do come across it again, you will be prepared. It does not do to dwell on dreams and forget to live, remember that. Now, why don't you put that admirable cloak back on and get off to bed?"

Harry began to do just that, and considered asking what Dumbledore saw in the mirror. However, Harry wasn't sure if he really wanted to know the answer to that, or if the headmaster would even tell him. Instead, he shrugged and bade the headmaster a "good night," before exiting the room and returning to his common room.

The next morning, Harry looked up an owl order form for a book to buy Grang— Hermione. He still wasn't used to calling her that. He found *Hogwarts, A History*, and decided that should keep her entertained for years. If Harry only had known how right he was.

When she returned the day before term started and Harry gave her the present, he thought she was going to die from lack of oxygen. Harry had to remind her to breathe before she began to cough. She thanked him profusely and Harry had to excuse himself before she suffocated him as well.

Hermione Granger wasn't the only person making it difficult for Harry to breathe. Flint was running Harry and the rest of the Slytherin Quidditch team ragged, as their practices became more intense in the effort to win the cup. After one particularly brutal practice, Harry grabbed a Chocolate Frog to help keep his stomach satisfied long enough to get real food. He pulled out the famous wizard card and was about to toss it on his bed when he froze. Smiling cheerfully back at Harry was the image of Nicolas Flamel. Harry read the card. 'Nicolas Flamel, the oldest living person in the Chocolate Frog Wizarding Cards, is particularly famous for being the only known maker of the Sorcerer's Stone. He is also highly notable in his work on alchemy with Albus Dumbledore. He enjoys a quiet life in Devon with his wife Perenelle, and is an avid opera fan.'

After the next Potions class, Harry hung back to tell Hermione what he had discovered.

"Granger," Harry said softly, pulling her arm as he spoke.

"Yes?" she asked hesitantly.

"Here," Harry said, handing her the card. She read it over swiftly.

"The Sorcerer's Stone!" she gasped. Harry nodded. "I bet you that's what they're hiding. Do you know what it is, Potter?" After Harry's negative nod, she continued. "It transforms any metal into pure gold. And it produces—"

"The Elixir of Life, which makes the drinker immortal," Harry recited from memory. Hermione flashed a large smile and nodded.

"Dumbledore must have known someone was after it, that's why he wanted it moved out of Gringotts."

"That makes sense," conceded Harry. "I need to get going though, Quidditch," Harry said by way of explanation. She nodded and he walked off.

Quidditch was draining Harry of his energy. He constantly fell asleep during class, only to be reprimanded and given a detention by Snape. Harry resolved to stay awake in that class; Snape had mentioned poison and Harry wasn't entirely sure that Snape wouldn't do it. After Gryffindor had managed to defeat Hufflepuff, Flint was on them more than ever to practice hard for Ravenclaw, and Harry's sleeping schedule continued to worsen.

Easter holidays arrived quickly and they were nowhere near as fun as Christmas. Grang- Hermione believed ten weeks was not enough time to study and was going frantic. Which would have been amusing, except, the teachers believed ten weeks was not enough time for them to learn either, so Harry's homework was growing at an alarming rate. Harry had to correct a failed Potions test, although Harry was sure Snape did it on purpose, and still received a P.

During one of Harry's study sessions in the library he simply passed out with his head laying next to the book One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi. So when he woke up he found drool rather than "Dittany." He wasn't sure what exactly woke him up but Hagrid's bulky frame caught Harry's eye.

"Hagrid! What are you doing in the library?" Harry asked curiously. Hagrid looked at Harry with a rather guilty expression on his face while he was hiding something behind his back.

"Jus' lookin'," he said, sounding very shifty. Before Harry could question him Hagrid looked very suspiciously at Harry. "An' what're you up ter? Yer not lookin' fer Nicolas Flamel, are yeh?"

"No Hagrid, I found out about him ages ago. There's a couple things about that I wanted to ask you though. What all is guarding the Stone, apart from Fluffy—"

"SHHHH!" Hagrid said frantically. Listen—come an' see me later. I'm not promising I'll tell yeh anythin' mind, but don' go rabbin' about it in here, students aren't s'posed ter know. They'll think I've told yeh—"

"I'll stop by later then, Hagrid."

Hagrid shuffled off.

Curiosity getting the better of him, Harry went over to the section Hagrid had been in and saw it was a section on dragons. He immediately started thinking that this was going to end very badly.

He went down to Hagrid's about an hour later and all of the curtains were closed. "Yup," Harry thought, "this is a bad idea." He knocked and Hagrid opened the door and looked around suspiciously before quickly inviting him in.

It was extremely hot and Harry immediately began to sweat. Harry noticed the fire was on/ Hagrid had some tea already made which Harry politely accepted and they sat down at the table.

"Well, go on then, wha d'yeh want ter ask me?"

"Well mostly, I just wanted to know what else is guarding the stone besides Fluffy," Harry said bluntly.

"Yeh know I can't tell yeh that, Harry." Hagrid pointed at him, frowning. "I don't right know meself, fer starters, and even if I did, yeh shouldn't be messin with things that ought not ter be messed with. Students aren't s'posed ter know. That Stone is here because isn't nowhere safer than Hogwarts. They already tried ter steal it

from Gringott's, which I'm sure yeh already know. Still don't know how yeh found out about Fluffy," Hagrid trailed off, sounding slightly accusatory.

"Well, Fluffy isn't the only protection for the Stone, right? Did other people at least help?"

"I guess there's no harm in telling yeh that. Let's see... Dumbledore borrowed Fluffy from me... some enchantments from some o' the teachers as well... Professor Sprout... Professor Flitwick... Professor McGonagall... Professor Quirrell... and Professor Snape. And Dumbledore did something as well, o' course."

"And no one knows how to get past Fluffy?"

"Not a soul but me an' Dumbledore," Hagrid said proudly, puffing his chest out.

"Well, at least there's that. Hagrid, can you make it cooler in here, it's really hot," Harry said, and he had a sip of tea.

"Fraid not, Harry." A knock on the door startled the both of them.

"Who's there?" Hagrid boomed.

"Hermione," came the reply, and Hagrid quickly let her in before shutting the door.

"Hello, Hermione," Hagrid said cheerfully. "Have you met Harry?"

"Yes, we know each other," she replied, looking sidelong at Harry.

"We were just talking about the Sorcerer's Stone," Harry said mischievously.

"Harry!" Hagrid reprimanded.

"It's alright Hagrid, she knows already. She helped me figure out who Flamel is," Harry said with a laugh. Hagrid ran his hand through his hair looking frustrated.

"It's bad enough that yeh know, Harry, yeh can't go tellin people," Hagrid said. "Hermione and that's it. And that's only because she's

very nice and comes ter visit me from time to time. More often than a certain Slytherin, anyway," Hagrid ended, staring at Harry before chuckling.

"You do?" Harry asked.

"He's good company," Hermione replied. "Also, it's nice to talk to Hagrid about classes and things." Harry smiled. He could agree with that.

Hermione looked to the fire. "Why do you have the fire going on, Hagrid? It's really warm outside."

Hagrid began to fidget nervously.

"That's not what I think that is, is it? I've read about them. But, you couldn't possibly have gotten a dragon egg, did you Hagrid? Because that would be ridiculous. They're illegal to have one and what would you even do with it?"

Hagrid seemed to have tuned her out.

"I won it, las' night at a pub in the village. Played some cards with a stranger. He was happy ter be rid of it ter be honest. And I've been doin' some readin'," Hagrid said, going over to his bed and pulling a book out from under his pillow. "Dragon Breeding for Pleasure and Profit," he said proudly. "A bit outta date, o' course, but it has everything yeh need to know about breedin' a dragon. Keep the egg in the fire, 'cause their mothers normally breathe on 'em, yeh know, and give it some brandy mixed with chicken blood every half hour after it hatches. An' here, it shows how ter identify diff'rent eggs. I got me a Norwegian Ridgeback. They're rare, them," Hagrid said proudly.

"You live in a wooden house," Hermione said sadly, but Hagrid was humming happily, imagining the fun he would have with his new baby dragon. Harry groaned.

Chapter 4: Conversations and Confrontations

Harry glared again at the note in his hand: It's hatching. Today was not going to be a great day. He caught Hermione's eye and as they left the Great Hall he showed her the note.

"He can't be serious," she said.

"If only that were true," Harry muttered. "To top it off, I have the match tomorrow too. I really don't need this."

"When do you want to go? After this class? We have to make sure Hagrid doesn't do something stupid—" Harry shook his head and she cut off. Malfoy had just walked by and his head was cocked curiously at the two of them.

"You know, Potter, you better be careful. Being near Mudbloods might be — hazardous to your health," Malfoy sneered.

"Drop it, Malfoy."

"You know, Potter, I really don't like you. You seem to always get on my nerves. Why is that? Why can't you be a normal Slytherin? Or better yet, why couldn't you have been a bloody Gryffindor. It's where you belong. You don't deserve to be in Slytherin house."

Weasley came up just then as well.

"Come on, Granger, you don't want to be around Slytherins. They're all a bunch of evil gits," Weasley said. Malfoy and Harry both glared at him.

"Weasley, I'm perfectly capable of deciding who I want to be around," Hermione retorted.

"No, you're not. You shouldn't be with Slytherins, Hermione. They aren't trustworthy, and they're all Dark."

"You don't understand a thing, Weasley."

"What's there to understand, Potter? You're the new Dark Lord."

"You would think that wouldn't you? Funny how at the beginning of the year you were worshipping me."

Weasley reached for his wand but Harry and Malfoy were faster.

"Don't even think about it, Weasel," Harry said.

"What curse should we use, Potter? As much as I dislike you, I dislike blood traitors and Gryffindors most of all. Unfortunately for Weasley here, he's both. So we seem to have a temporary alliance."

"What is the meaning of this?" Harry and Malfoy's smirking faces lost their edge when they heard McGonagall's voice. They both turned around. Fortunately, Snape was right on her tail.

"Weasley was going to try and hex us so we pulled our wands out to defend ourselves, Professor," Malfoy said in a sickeningly sweet voice.

"Well in that case I should think Mr. Malfoy deserves five points for heading off a conflict, wouldn't you agree, Professor McGonagall?" Snape asked. McGonagall looked like she most certainly did not agree with that assessment of the situation but without proof, there wasn't much she could do.

McGonagall sighed. Trying to salvage the situation, she looked at her favorite student. "Well I would have to give Miss Granger five points as well for keeping her head and not trying to pull her wand out for a fight, but alerting me to a problem," McGonagall said with a curt smile to Hermione. Snape's smirk dampened a little.

"Mr. Weasley should probably serve detention as well, just to make sure he doesn't try to duel in the hallways. I'll take care of it, Minerva. I know you have a class," Snape said with a smirk. McGonagall looked at Weasley and disappointment shone on her face.

"Very well, Mr. Weasley, you will have a detention, I'll send you a notice for when you are to go." Weasley looked indignant, but showing previously unheard of self-restraint wisely held his tongue. He nodded and walked away.

Hermione looked at Harry and they came to a mutual agreement that they would go after class to Hagrid's. She walked away leaving Harry with Malfoy.

"So, Potter," he drawled.

"Yeah?"

"If you don't catch the snitch tomorrow, consider you're social life forfeit."

'What social life?' Harry thought somewhat morosely. Instead he reasoned sarcasm was the best response here and said, "Not letting me be with anyone else, Malfoy? Were you looking for an exclusive relationship? Because I know Bulstrode has been eyeing you on occasion as well as Parkinson if that's what you're after. Even that Hufflepuff, Finch-Fletchley, if you keep for the other team if you know what I mean." Harry walked away before Malfoy could figure out what he said.

Defense class seemed to go by too quickly for Harry's liking and he found himself traipsing through the grounds to reach Hagrid's hut. At the door, he met Hermione, who had walked from Herbology, and together they tentatively knocked. An overly enthusiastic Hagrid greeted them with a "quick it's almost out" and they were swiftly let inside the steaming house and the door quickly shut behind them of its own accord.

The egg was lying on the table. There were deep cracks in it. Something was moving inside; a funny clicking noise was coming from it.

The three of them drew their chairs up to the table and watched with bated breath.

All at once there was a scraping noise and the egg split open. The baby dragon flopped onto the table. It wasn't exactly pretty, by any stretch of the imagination; Harry thought it looked like Hagrid's pink umbrella, only crumpled and black. Its spiny wings were huge compared to its skinny jet body; it had a long snout with wide nostrils, the stubs of horns, and bulging, orange eyes that stared at them unblinkingly.

All of a sudden, it sneezed. A couple of sparks flew out of its snout.

"Isn't he beautiful?" Hagrid murmured. Harry was inclined to disagree. Hagrid reached a hand out to stroke the dragon's head. It snapped at his fingers, showing pointed fangs.

"Bless him, look, he knows his mommy!" Hagrid cried. Harry thought that was too much of a stretch; the dragon had tried to bite him. Hermione was having different worries.

"Hagrid," she began tentatively, "how fast do Norwegian Ridgebacks grow, exactly?"

Hagrid was about to answer but suddenly his cheeks were losing their color. He leapt to his feet and ran to the window.

"What's the matter?"

"Someone was lookin' through the gap in the curtains— it's a kid— he's runnin' back ter the school," Hagrid said nervously.

Harry bolted to the door and looked out. Even at a distance there was no mistaking the shock of red hair.

Weasley had seen the dragon.

Harry found himself trying to get out of this situation. Weasley had something he could hold over Harry. The bad thing was Harry didn't know if some perverse sense of Gryffindor pride would keep the redhead in check. Would Weasley be willing to get Hagrid in trouble, just to get at Harry? It all came down to how much Weasley hated Harry. That was worrying. Harry didn't know how long he sat out by the lake contemplating his situation, but Hermione must have stopped by at some point because when he looked up, she was there.

"So what do you think we should do?" Harry asked to break the silence. It was only a momentary lapse though because Hermione remained quiet for some time. When Harry was about to ask her again she answered.

"As much as it pains you, Harry, we should talk to him," she said finally.

Harry made a face. "Do you really think that will help?"

"Can it hurt?" she countered.

"Yes," Harry said simply.

"Fine," she huffed, although the corner of her mouth told a different story as it was slightly upturned. "I'll talk to him."

"Alright," Harry answered, and went back to staring at the lake. Hermione stared at him, somewhat bemused and walked off. It wasn't until a couple hours later that she wondered how exactly he talked her into willingly having a conversation with Ron Weasley.

Harry continued to stare out at the lake, shivering once as he 'felt' something— but he couldn't really describe it. When he tried to, he was interrupted again.

"Knut for your thoughts?" asked a quiet voice. Harry turned and his eyes found Lily Moon's.

"Only a knut?" Harry asked.

"Well as I don't have anything worth less than a Knut..." Moon— Lily trailed off with a smirk.

"Thanks," Harry replied sarcastically.

After a slightly lengthy silence, Lily broke it. "So were you planning on answering or do I have to hex it out of you?" she asked with a mild glare. She prodded him with her wand to get her point across but her eyes were sparkling with mirth. She flicked the blond bangs out of her face and waited expectantly. "Because otherwise, your moping is distracting from my favorite place to relax."

You wouldn't believe me if I told you. "Just the usual troubles," I have to deal with a bloody dragon! "And just thinking about the day," plus I have random thoughts and memories that aren't my own, "and how much I love Hogwarts," oh and did I mention that most of the school hates me? The words sounded hollow in Harry's own head, forget out loud. Lily seemed like she didn't believe him but didn't push the issue.

"It is nice isn't it?" she commented. "Did you enjoy your Christmas?" she asked lazily as she tossed a stone into the lake, watching as it skipped across.

"Thanks for the quill," Harry said, unable to contain his grin. She looked sheepish for her part but quickly recovered.

"You never seem to have one when you need it. And when you have one you normally don't want it," she said philosophically.

Harry nodded sagely. "Well I think I'm going to go. Quidditch game tomorrow and all. Need to eat and sleep and other things," Harry finished lamely. She merely nodded and wished him good luck before he departed.

Although he did have a Quidditch game, that was the last thing on his mind. He had been sitting by the lake daydreaming and came across a rather vivid memory he knew had never happened. But... at the same time he knew that it had.

Harry heard a whistle and then watched as he waded into the lake and there were three other people around him. He pulled something out of his pocket and stuffed it in his mouth. He suddenly shivered as his body reacted to the cold from the memory. His hands and feet were green and webby under water once he had dived under. There was no longer a need to blink and as he watched, his eyes, staring straight into the heart of the lake, became determined and he propelled himself forward. The memory flew by and seemed to fast forward, until Harry arrived at a stone statue of what looked like a mermaid. There were four people who were tied to the tail. One of them looked like Weasley but— different somehow. Harry smiled maliciously as the thought appeared. Weasley, a hostage underwater? How curious. Another one of the remaining three people were also recognizable. It was Hermione, and the difference with Weasley was quickly apparent. He was older, as was Hermione. Harry watched as the memory-Harry hacked away at the bindings holding Weasley. Harry wondered why he would do that, but at the same time it was like he knew it was the right thing to do. Harry waited expectantly as he assumed he would begin to free the remaining three hostages. When he started on Hermione, however, the merpeople seemed to disagree with that course of action. They grabbed him roughly and told him to leave the others. "Your task is

to retrieve your own friend... leave the others..." Harry wondered why he would consider Weasley a friend, but he also found himself wondering why he wouldn't. Ron was his best mate, wasn't he? No, he was a blood traitor who needed to be killed.

Harry's confusing thoughts took him out of his memory and he found himself grasping at the wisps of it. First and foremost in his mind was Ron Weasley. He always seemed to be the root of trouble for Harry, no matter what he was dealing with, whether it was dragons or memories. Harry vaguely remembered his feelings at the sorting, how something had been... off. And he remembered something about Quirrell; it was irritating because he knew it had been important.

The matter had to be dropped though, because Harry had realized he'd reached the castle. He had homework that needed a looking at if Harry wanted to be able to survive this week with his marks intact.

The next day arrived and Harry went down to breakfast, getting ready for his first Quidditch match. Hermione said she would cheer for him, which brightened Harry's smile a bit. His fellow first years nodded to him diplomatically, although Blaise came and sat next to him. Higgs sent him glares from across the table. Harry just ignored it all, and after eating a couple pieces of toast, grabbed his broomstick and headed to the changing rooms. Blaise followed after him.

"You need to catch the Snitch, Harry, because I've got a lot of Galleons riding on it so make sure you catch it. Try and make sure Slytherin isn't down by one hundred and fifty points or more but either way it's ok, just make sure you get the Snitch because if you don't I'll be broke and do you really want that on your conscience Harry and are you listening to a word I'm saying?" Blaise finished with only one breath in that whole sentence. It reminded Harry of a certain bushy-haired Gryffindor and a smile appeared on his face. He did take note of the use of his first name though. Blaise was warming up to him or he really didn't want to lose the bet. Harry thought it was a bit of both.

"Catch the Snitch. Got it," Harry said. Blaise sighed in relief, wished him luck, and headed off to the stands to get a good seat.

Harry's first Quidditch match was set to begin. Slytherin would be facing off against Ravenclaw and Harry was anxious to win it. He listened to Flint's pep talk in the changing room before the match, which was really more of listening to death threats if they lost, and headed onto the pitch.

Hooch had them all shake hands and Harry glanced at his Ravenclaw counterpart. It was an Asian girl who looked somewhat familiar to Harry. He heard Jordan announce her name as Cho Chang. Once the Quaffle was thrown in the air all thoughts of where he knew the opposing Seeker from vanished from his head and he began to search for the Snitch.

"And we're off!" cried Lee Jordan. "Captain Marcus Flint takes the Quaffle straight away and heads off to goal. He ducks a bludger as well as Ravenclaw Chaser Roger Davies, passes to Adrian Pucey who shoots and," Jordan groaned. "Ten-zero to Slytherin. Chambers now in possession of the Quaffle. He fakes right and ouch nice hit by Slytherin Beater Thomas Bole, Montague now with the Quaffle, he shoots it, saved by Keeper Eddie Carmichael, a recent find of Captain Davies, the leader of this young Ravenclaw team."

Harry droned out the commentary on his search for the Snitch and was annoyed to find that Chang was shadowing him. Well fine, if she wanted to play hard ball...

"It looks like Potter's seen the Snitch!" Harry had taken off after an imaginary Snitch assuming Chang would follow. He wasn't let down. She took off in hot pursuit and Harry pulled his broom into a dive. He stretched out his hand, forcing her to speed up, but then Harry pulled out of his dive at the last instant, yanking on his broom and making an almost impossible one hundred and eighty degree turn. Cho Chang didn't have a chance. She crashed straight into the ground and didn't get up. Davies was forced to call a time out as they checked her out. Harry used the opportunity to look for the Snitch unimpeded.

Ravenclaw consulted quickly and then took back to the skies to fight the Slytherin Chasers with a new game plan in hand. Harry watched as Bole and Derrick returned to their underhanded tactics from the previous task and they took out Ravenclaw's keeper with two well-placed bludgers. The keeper flipped through the center hoop and landed sprawled on the ground.

"OF ALL THE CHEATING LYING SCUMBA—"

"JORDAN!" screamed Professor McGonagall.

"THE SLIMY SLYTHERIN SCUMS SLAUGHTER RAVENCLAW'S KEEPER IN AN UNDERHANDED ILLEGAL—"

"JORDAN! I WON'T TELL YOU AGAIN."

"Sorry, Professor," he responded without meaning it at all. "And the Ravenclaw keeper is practically murdered by Slytherin's Beaters, which I'm sure could happen to anyone, and Slytherin scores," he said dejectedly as three-fourths of the stadium booed.

Slytherin scored several unanswered goals. The Ravenclaw keeper had returned to circling his goal posts but he was completely disoriented. Harry watched Chang shadowing him desperately as Slytherin was pulling away steadily. Once the Slytherins had pulled ahead by one hundred and forty points, Harry caught sight of the snitch.

That's when something strange happened. Harry's broom, in mid-flight, bucked. He almost flew backwards off the broom but he managed to stay on. Chang though, who had been following closely and hadn't seen him stop, slammed into Harry. He barely managed to remain on his broom as his hand slipped. It gave another almighty lurch and rose upwards into the air, taking him up over two hundred meters. Harry was still alright though, and his broom, while continuing to buck madly, was slowing down. Harry glanced at the teacher's stands and saw Snape muttering rapidly, his eyes unblinking. Harry saw Quirrell doing the same thing. One was obviously cursing him. His concentration lapsed though as he was nailed by a bludger and he was forced to let go of his broom. He saw Quirrell grin madly and Snape swear, so he knew which Professor was doing what, but he had more pressing matters to attend to, such as not dying.

Chang was still flying in pursuit of the Snitch but Harry knew he had to get his broom. He pulled his wand out as he was falling and mentally called Accio broom and the broom flew to him. Harry landed on the broom about a foot or two away from the ground and tore off after Chang and the Snitch, to the gasps of the crowd.

Once he caught up to Ravenclaw's dark-haired Seeker, Chang tried to shoulder him off but she was no match for Harry. He put on an extra burst of speed and came right up to the Snitch. He would've had it but the damn thing flew straight up and backwards, right towards Chang. Harry improvised. He leapt backwards off his broom and tried to grab the Snitch, but Cho blocked his hand and the Snitch flew in front of his face mere centimeters from Cho's. She looked at him and the second seemed to last a lifetime, they were both seemingly frozen, looking deep into each other eyes. Harry had a vague recollection of doing this before, only her eyes had been glossy from tears.

The moment unfroze though and Harry did the first thing he could think of: he grabbed the Snitch in his mouth. This had the unfortunate side-effect of his and Cho's faces collided with each other, although Cho's lips seemed to brush against Harry's of their own accord. Harry rocketed towards the ground and hit it with a thump, Cho landing on top of him. Harry spit out the Snitch and was grinning widely. Harry wasn't sure if Snape's head had inclined or if it had been a trick of the light, but by all appearances it looked like Snape had given Harry an imperceptible nod.

Harry's timely catch of the Snitch had managed to prevent Ravenclaw from grabbing a victory from the jaws of defeat, and thus had increased his popularity among his fellow Slytherins. Snape was almost willing to acknowledge Harry's house allegiance in a positive way. Almost. Harry glanced at Cho, who seemed fine, and gave her a nod. She tentatively hugged him, thanking him for breaking her fall. Harry winced and waved it off. They looked at each other again and the 'kiss' they had shared in the air was obviously on both of their minds. He headed back to the dressing room and he noticed Lily glaring daggers at Cho. So, to his surprise, was Hermione. Harry merely changed and headed back to the castle, both girls rushing to his side. He introduced them to each other and they merely nodded and shook hands. Blaise came up to him also.

"Blaise," Harry nodded. Blaise was grinning madly.

"Thanks again for swallowing– errr– catching the Snitch, Harry. Won me twelve Galleons." Harry smiled at his friend's antics.

But on the other side of the Quidditch match, Harry's more pressing issues seemed to rear their ugly head up at him. The most conspicuous issue was obviously the dragon Norbert, as Hagrid had christened the Norwegian Ridgeback.

The next week was very long for Harry. He had been sneaking out to help Hagrid with the dragon and on more than one occasion had run into the Weasley twins lurking outside the Slytherin dorms. The first time he thought nothing of it. The second time he was slightly suspicious. The third time he called them on it.

"What are you two doing down here?"

There was a very audible gulp as they glanced shiftily at one another. Harry pressed on into the silence. "I've heard you were pranksters," Harry began dryly. "You wouldn't be planning on pranking the Slytherins would you?"

Fred and George exchanged glances. Then they each slung an arm over Harry's shoulders.

"Harry, my boy," boomed Fred as he pulled Harry under his arm.

"Ask us no questions we'll tell you no lies," quipped George.

"You've been trying to break into the common room." It wasn't a question.

"Now, Harry, what you've got to understand is—"

"Yeah it's nothing personal—"

"It's not Slytherins as a whole we dislike—"

"Just individual gits—"

"Who shall remain nameless—"

Fred sneezed while George muttered Malfoy under his breath. "I heard you and Malfoy were seeing each other, exclusively," Harry deadpanned.

The amount of times that both Fred and George Weasley had been rendered speechless was few and each time had been well-documented, even going so far as to declare each an unofficial holiday among the non-Weasley twins in the know. This was one of those times. Fred and George were both spluttering incoherently after a fifteen second surprised silence. Harry raised an eyebrow in an accurate portrayal of a greasy potions master.

Then Harry had an idea, completely unrelated to jokes.

"Say, your brother Charlie is into dragons isn't he?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Well, I have a proposition for you." Harry outlined his plans. He was willing to let them into the common room if they would help him get the dragon off his hands.

"Well, that explains why you are always walking the corridors at such odd hours..." trailed off Fred.

"You're one to talk, Weasley."

"That may be true but we are less likely to get caught. We have experience," George answered.

"Experience in getting caught at least," Harry countered. The twins broke into a grin.

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking, George?"

"Indubitably, Fred."

"Harry, the two of us believe—"

"That our dear Ronniekins—"

"Has a rather low opinion of you—"

"That is mostly inaccurate."

"Poor thing wanted you in Gryffindor—"

"But it wasn't meant to be," they finished sadly.

"Well your brother isn't exactly innocent here," Harry said conspiratorially.

"Do tell Harrikins."

"His death-defying catch of Longbottom's Remembrall was impressive only because he never left the ground on his broom. I'm the one that caught it; he just snatched it from me when I tumbled onto the ground. It was actually fairly Slytherin of him," Harry commented.

"So McGonagall mistook you for Ron?"

"Well she couldn't tell and saw him with the Remembrall when she came outside and assumed it was him who caught it I suppose."

"Well don't let him hear you say that was Slytherin of him, he'll have a fit. But besides, Wood seems to have replaced him. He wasn't very happy with him when he grabbed the Snitch right after he told him not to."

"Nice catch by the way on your Snitch," Fred said.

"Yeah we thought you were going to choke, but then you got the Snitch, and then we thought you were going to choke again," said George with a smile.

Harry's face reddened, but he smiled nonetheless. "Thanks Weasley and Weasley. So you have the password, serpensortia, do your worst. I'm going to bed. That ruddy dragon is tiring."

"Many thanks Mr. Boy-who-likes-sarcasm." Harry snorted and entered the common room which had just opened from his repeating the password and let it close behind him. He headed up to his bed and after changing, was asleep before he hit the pillow.

The next day went by in a blur for Harry. He recounted his plan about the dragon to Hermione. Thankfully, the twins had already sent off a letter to Charlie. He mentioned it to Hagrid and, with Hermione's help and Hagrid's fond memories of the redhead, managed to convince him to send Norbert off to Charlie.

Harry had lent the twins Hedwig to send off the letter so he was now patiently waiting for its return. Of course, plenty of entertainment was provided to pass the time. A couple days later at breakfast, all the Slytherins entered the Great Hall and Harry knew today the prank would occur. The twins had decided to do all the Slytherins and they warned Harry the night before, because it would look suspicious if everyone was affected except him. He had to admit they thought their prank through. The actual range of spells they used weren't completely known to Harry but the gist of it was that the activation spell was when Snape, or King git as they called him, entered for breakfast. He usually came in after the students had settled so as to avoid traffic and left early for similar reasons, so he was the best way to activate it.

That night, Harry stayed out a little later than usual and headed to the kitchens under his invisibility cloak. He had looked at what the some of the Weasley's spells would do and liberally borrowed them, modifying them as needed. He had a discussion with a couple of the house-elves and, after stopping at the Great Hall to cast two quick charms on top of the Weasley's activation charms, headed smugly back to his dormitory and waited expectantly for the next morning.

So with all the Slytherins seated at their table, Snape stalked into the Great Hall, robes billowing behind him and Harry again found himself pondering just how Snape always managed to do that. His brain was prevented from further thought as the spells took effect. The Gryffindors noticed first and were roaring with laughter. The Slytherins' robes had all been transfigured to look a flamboyant pink. Apparently there was more than one spell on each Slytherin as when Malfoy retorted angrily at Weasley his voice traveled several octaves higher. He grew red in the face and ducked under the table.

But the prank wasn't over yet. Once some of the Slytherins stood to race back to their common room the third part of the prank activated. While the boys' voices had become extremely high pitched and the girls' voices quite deep and masculine, (which was downright frightening when Millicent Bulstrode was speaking) the final part of the prank involved appearance. The boys seemed to have grown curves in particular areas while the girls magically had a bulge in their lower regions appear innocuously.

The Slytherins were laughed out of the hall. Harry waved his wand cheerily in the direction of the Gryffindors as Snape stalked menacingly towards their table while the school issued wild catcalls. He grabbed both Fred and George Weasley by an ear and dragged them bodily from the Great Hall. It wasn't until Snape came closer that Harry could see what had Snape so angry. His normally greasy black hair had been dyed red and appeared washed— which was a miracle in itself, and his normally billowing cape had turned red and the collars were turned upward. Coupled with the pale, sallow skin he seemed to have taken on the appearance of a particularly ugly redheaded vampire. When he yelled "Weasley," it came out as a high-pitched squeak and Snape's glare became even more hostile if at all possible.

Of course, when Snape had opened his mouth everyone's laughter increased even more, and his voice raised it to new limits. Snape's teeth had turned into elongated fangs.

Fred and George, twin images of innocence and plausible deniability, stared at Snape in horror. They hadn't pranked Snape but it looked like they would be taking the brunt of it. As they were dragged out Harry raised his glass to them, winked, and drank heartily from his pumpkin juice, allowing a smile to grace his lips.

Once he had known the timing of the Weasley twins' pranks, he had convinced a house-elf to put a potion he snuck out of the Weasley's storage that dyed hair red. After placing a pair of spells on the Great Hall, Snape's cloak and collar had changed subtly. Once he had drunken from his goblet, the hair potion had activated along with the voice charms that had been on the goblet and transferred onto Snape. The fangs were a final touch that Harry had transfigured while waving his wand at the Gryffindors.

Harry cancelled the spells on his person and went back to eating his breakfast cheerfully. It was always a good day when one could pull one over on the Weasley twins.

The prank was why, a few days later, a noticeably subdued pair of redheads approached Harry with a letter from Charlie. Essentially, Charlie needed the dragon at the top of the Astronomy tower on Saturday at midnight. Harry thanked the twins and discussed it with Hermione.

"I've got the invisibility cloak," Harry said, showing her. "It shouldn't be too difficult— I think the cloak is big enough to cover two of us and Norbert." It was a mark of how bad the last week had been that Hermione agreed with him. Anything to get rid of Norbert and Weasley. Ron had apparently been holding the information over Hermione, threatening her with it and getting her to do his homework for him. Of course, according to him it was to prevent her from helping the Slytherins cheat and the remaining Gryffindor first years had agreed whole-heartedly with that logic.

Hermione had visited the bathrooms on more than one occasion, but she had found a couple friends in Lily Moon and Tracey Davis. The last Potions class had seen her paired with Lily while Harry was again with Tracey. They had apparently had a meaningful discussion which resulted in the two girls becoming friends, and they only cost Gryffindor ten points for "socializing during my class!" Of course, Harry's snort of disbelief had cost Slytherin ten as well.

"Potter! That will be ten points from Slytherin!" Harry stared incredulously at his most hated Professor. Snape was clearly still furious about the prank and was taking it out on Harry.

"You will treat me with proper respect and will refrain from speaking out of turn in my class, is that understood?"

"Yes," Harry muttered darkly.

"Yes sir," Snape said.

"There's no need to call me sir, Professor," Harry shot back, unaware of where the words were coming from, but having the strange feeling that they sounded just as good the second time around.

"Potter! That's another twenty points and detention! And stop speaking when you haven't been called upon to speak!"

"Fine, Snivellus!" Harry said, standing up and kicking his chair out from behind him.

"I thought I told you to stop talking you insufferable brat! That's another thirty points for your cheek! And a week of detention!"

Snape roared, his face contorted into lines of hatred and deep loathing.

But Harry had had enough. He looked Snape straight in the eye, and spun around and walked out of the classroom, ignoring Snape's yells of outrage. When Harry reached the door he turned and looked at his head of house.

"Just so you know, I'm not James Potter, sir," Harry spat. He turned back around, his cloak billowing out impressively behind him, and left the classroom.

Harry's dramatic exit was the talk of the school.

Harry's past detentions had just been assigned to Filch and Harry had merely cleaned different parts of the castle, but this time Snape decided Harry would spend his detention cleaning cauldrons. He had adopted the new tactic of ignoring Harry which suited them both just fine. His detention was definitely difficult though because Longbottom had managed to melt his cauldron, which had made a gigantic mess. The detention started the same Saturday evening that they were sending Norbert away. Harry showed up promptly and set to work.

As Harry was working on the cauldrons that night he was getting an increasingly painful headache. He gasped twice and stared straight at Snape the second time. There was a rustling at Snape's desk as his hand swept to the side and Snape's head was staring at the essays he was grading. Harry had the feeling that the greasy git had been staring at Harry just the moment before. He turned back to the cauldrons and his headache returned in full force. As the pain steadily increased, his scar flared unexpectedly. He heard a gasp of pain from Snape and glanced at him as the Professor stood up, his face white, and rushed into his office, grasping his forearm. Harry didn't have time to think about it as he was suddenly drawn into a vision.

He had just lowered his wand, smirking as he watched the proud unicorn fall to the ground. The trail of the silvery blood was all around him as he had chased this creature through the forest, injuring it when he could. It had taken a few days to kill the beast but he had finally done it. He walked over the forest earth towards the unicorn, almost stalking it. He kneeled and allowed the unicorn

blood to flow into his mouth. He gave a triumphant yell and greedily drank from the fallen unicorn. After licking his lips he felt invigorated. He began walking away and Harry realized they were in the Forbidden Forest. He caught a glimpse of himself in the reflection of the unicorn blood and screamed.

Harry realized he was screaming in the middle of his detention as well but there was nothing that could be done for it. His scar was bleeding profusely. Snape was still nowhere to be seen. A silencing charm had been cast outside the potions master's office so Harry was on his own. He wiped away the blood from his forehead and angrily brushed it away from the cauldron he had been cleaning. As it was the last one he stood up and without telling Snape left the dungeons.

Unfortunately, Harry still wasn't comfortable enough with his fellow Slytherin friends to talk to them personally about what happened. Blaise had started to spend some time with him, having warmed up to Harry after the Quidditch match, while Lily seemed to be willing to talk to him because she seemed to get along with Hermione for whatever reason. He grabbed the cloak and headed out to meet Hermione. They trooped over to Hagrid's hut and grabbed the dragon amidst tears from the half-giant.

"I've packed him a teddy in case he gets lonely," Hagrid had said through tears. Moments later a distinctive shredding noise indicated said teddy had more than likely lost an appendage, if not its head.

"Bye Norbert! Mommy will never forget you!" sobbed Hagrid.

The crate was taken between Harry and Hermione and the two managed to navigate the steps to reach the Astronomy tower without really realizing how they did. They passed Professor McGonagall, who was in her tartan bathrobe and wearing a hairnet. Harry had to stifle a laugh. Upon reaching the tower, after waiting a few minutes they saw four figures approaching on brooms.

They met Charlie's friends, who were a cheery lot and showed them how they'd be taking Norbert back on their harness. Harry and Hermione shook hands with each of them and waved as they flew off.

A particularly strong gust of wind made Harry shiver and he made to pull the invisibility cloak tighter for warmth but he realized they weren't wearing it. The duo doubled back to grab the invisibility cloak they'd nearly forgotten, and then the pair made it back to their respective dormitories in relative safety, only having to dodge Filch at the foot of the stairs. Harry threw himself onto his bed, ignoring the stabbing pain on his forehead, and went to sleep. He would discover to his chagrin in the morning that the protections around his curtains hadn't activated as they normally did.

Chapter Five: Keep Your Friends Close...

The next morning, Harry awoke and realized he wasn't protected by his curtains that night. Thankfully, first years weren't that competent in spells so the worst that had happened was he had been pranked. Although that in itself was still pretty bad. His pajamas, which had been changed somehow to look like women's clothes, clung loosely to his body. The words P.M.S. - Potter's Mentally Sick, shone prominently across the front. He glared at Blaise, who was howling with laughter, as he walked into the bathroom to change. Malfoy was thinking up no doubt uninspired insults to shout at Harry during breakfast while Nott just seemed mildly amused. Crabbe and Goyle merely continued snoring.

Harry came out of the shower and renewed his glare towards Blaise, who clapped a hand to Harry's shoulder and led him down to breakfast.

"So how was detention, oh fearless leader? You weren't mentally ill or anything, were you? I mean, I don't know if this is a monthly thing or what," Blaise said with a grin, referring to Christmas when Harry had been shocked he had presents. Blaise believed Harry must be mental.

"You know, just because I was surprised about Christmas presents doesn't mean I'm mental Zabini. As for detention...well...ironically enough I was," Harry finished shortly. He decided to tell Blaise about the vision because he really needed to speak to someone and Blaise was as good as any. Even though he was being quite annoying recently, he had recently seemed to be friendly with Harry. And Harry could definitely use a confidant.

"What happened?" Blaise asked quietly.

"Snape," Harry replied in an equally low voice. "I was getting a really bad headache and then I saw something, like a vision I guess. I—" Harry hesitated for a fraction of a second, "saw someone stalking a unicorn. They killed it and began to drink the blood," Harry ended with a shudder. Blaise was pale, which was remarkable for the black boy.

"Unicorn blood? Are you sure?"

"Positive. Why?"

"Well, drinking unicorn blood is bad, Potter. Real bad. Unicorn blood has remarkable healing powers, they can sustain your life even if your inches from death. But to kill something as pure as a unicorn for such selfish reasons means you'll live out a cursed life, because you've slain something pure and innocent. Of course I'm sure you already knew that, but it does bear repeating."

"I'm going to talk to Hagrid. I want to know if he knows anything about a dead unicorn. You coming?" Harry asked. Blaise nodded grimly.

The two warily left the Great Hall, en route towards Hagrid's hut, talking about inconsequential things to keep their minds off of the fate of the unicorn. Exams were brought up, followed by the realizations they were only two weeks away before the topic was summarily dropped. Harry realized Blaise really wasn't too bad of a guy; although he would still have hell to pay for that prank this morning. Thankfully, his inspiration arrived in the form of Millicent Bulstrode, who began chasing after Blaise when they had exited the Great Hall. He dragged Harry into a corner until Millicent ran by, and told Harry how she was practically stalking him.

"It's really frightening. I mean, come on, Harry. She looks like she'll suffocate me to death with a hug." Harry snorted despite himself. He did note the use of his first name though.

"Whatever you say, Blaise," Harry said with a grin, and they walked onto the grounds. Blaise asked Harry why he talked to Granger, but Harry merely smiled enigmatically. A few minutes later they reached Hagrid's hut and Harry knocked on the door loudly.

"Who's there?" Hagrid called, opening the door. "Oh it's you, Harry. Come on in."

"Hagrid, this is Blaise Zabini."

"Well nice to meet yeh, Blaise. Hold on a minute and lemme make some tea."

"How're yer classes goin'?"

"Not bad, Hagrid," Harry replied as he scratched Fang's ear. The dog slobbered merrily. He and Blaise made their way to the table and pulled out a chair each to sit down.

Harry looked at Hagrid, and then spoke to Blaise, while trying to gauge the large man's reaction.

"Hagrid's kept some really wild animals, Blaise, like Dragons and Cerberus's." Blaise's mouth went wide.

"Harry, I thought I tol' yeh not ter tell anyone about Norbert and Fluffy," Hagrid said, glaring halfheartedly. Blaise took up the mantle though in earnest.

"Dragons, Hagrid? Really?" Blaise asked, mildly impressed. "What kind?"

"A Norwegian Ridgeback," Hagrid said proudly, his previous animosity towards Harry forgotten. He went on to describe the Dragon in earnest while Harry managed to sneak some of the stoat sandwiches off his plate and into Fang's stomach.

"And the Cerberus?" Blaise queried.

"Oh yeh mean Fluffy?"

Blaise stared. "You have got to be kidding. A three-headed dog named Fluffy?"

"Fluffy's great, Blaise. Lent him to Dumbledore to protect the—"

Hagrid stopped abruptly. "Thingy," he finished lamely. Harry gauged Blaise's reaction and watched him note that there was something being guarded before moving on.

Hagrid made to speak but Blaise was faster. "Hagrid, has anything been happening to the unicorns in the forest?"

"Now hang on a minute, how d'you know about the unicorn?"

"We know a lot of things, Hagrid," answered Harry cheekily.

"A lot of things yeh were better off not knowing as well 'arry." Hagrid replied grumpily. "But ter answer yer question, there's a unicorn that's been hurt badly by summat. I found it dead this mornin'. I was about ter go into the forest and talk ter the centaurs if you two want ter come," Hagrid finished brightly.

Blaise and Harry shared a look. A very long look. A very long, exasperated look. Then Blaise's head jerked slightly downward and they both jumped out of their chairs. Better now while there was still light.

"Let's go then, Hagrid," Harry said.

The trio walked out of Hagrid's hut with Fang in tow. Hagrid, carrying his crossbow, motioned for them to follow in his wake.

"Make sure ter keep ter the path. There's the trail of unicorn blood, all that silvery stuff," Hagrid said, motioning vaguely with his hands to the tree branches.

"Ronan! Bane! Firenze! Any of you lot out here?" Hagrid called as they entered the forest. They reached a clearing and a figure entered it. To the waist was a man, with red hair and beard, but below that was a horse's gleaming chestnut body with a long, reddish tail.

"Ronan," Hagrid nodded. "How are yeh?"

"Good morning to you too, Hagrid," said Ronan. He had a deep, sorrowful voice.

"This is Harry Potter an' Blaise Zabini, by the way. Students up at the school. An' this is Ronan, you two. He's a centaur."

"We'd noticed," Blaise said dryly.

"Good evening," said Ronan, after staring at Harry in mild interest for a moment. "Students, are you? And do you learn much, up at the school?"

"You could say that," Harry answered.

"Well that's something," Ronan sighed. He flung back his head and stared at the sky. "Mars was very bright last night. It has been for many nights."

"Listen, Ronan. There's been a unicorn that was killed in here not too long ago. You seen anythin'?"

Ronan didn't answer immediately. He stared upward, unblinkingly, then sighed again.

"Always the innocent are the first victims," he said philosophically. "So it has been for ages past, so it is now."

"Right, but have yeh seen anythin,' Ronan? Anythin' unusual?"

"Mars has been very bright, lately," he said while Hagrid stared. "Unusually bright." Harry hid a snort.

"I meant anythin' a little closer ter home." Hagrid said, growing impatient. "Nothin' strange then?"

"The forest hides many secrets."

A second centaur entered the clearing, black-haired and bodied, wilder-looking than Ronan.

"Hullo, Bane. All right?" Hagrid asked.

"Good morning, Hagrid, I hope you are well?"

"Well enough. Listen Bane, would yeh know anythin' about a unicorn that was killed in here the other night?"

"Mars was bright the other night," he said simply.

"So we've heard."

"Harry Potter?" whispered a voice. Harry turned, tuning out the rest of Hagrid's conversation. A white-blond palomino centaur met his inquiring gaze.

"Yes?" Harry asked. A pair of astonishingly blue eyes, almost like pale sapphires, looked at him, making the cursory glance to his scar.

"My name is Firenze," he said.

"Do you know anything about the dead unicorn, Firenze?" Harry asked.

"Do you know what unicorn blood is used for, Harry Potter?"

"Yes, it saves you if you are even an inch from death. But it gives you a cursed, half-life. It's really not worth it. It'd be better to die," Harry added quietly.

"It would," Firenze agreed. "Unless all you need is to stay alive long enough to drink something else, something that will mean you could never die."

"The Sorcerer's Stone," Harry said. Blaise shot him a look, but Harry ignored it. "And you were talking about Voldemort weren't you?"

Firenze looked at him grimly. "The planets have been read wrongly before now, even by centaurs. I sincerely hope this is one of those times."

"Firenze!" yelled Bane. "What are you telling him? Remember, we are sworn not to set ourselves against the heavens. Have we not read what is to come in the movements of the planets?"

"Firenze must have thought he was acting for the best, Bane," replied Ronan, nervously pawing his foot in the ground.

"For the best!" he thundered. "Centaurs are only concerned with what has been foretold by the planets."

"Did you see that unicorn, Bane? Did you? It was dead, Bane. Murdered. I set myself against whatever is committing these atrocities against an innocent creature. Do you not understand why that unicorn was killed, Bane? Or have the planets not let you in on that secret? I will act as I see fit and you— you will act as you see fit."

"We are centaurs, Firenze! We do not involve ourselves in squabbles among humans."

"This is far from a squabble, Bane and you know it. You've read the heavens. It seems like it has to have been misread, but there's no way it could have been. The brightness of Mars emphasizes that. This war has already been lost once, Bane. Would you have it be lost again?"

Firenze whisked around and plunged off into the trees, leaving them all behind. Harry, Hagrid, and Blaise nodded politely to the angry centaurs and retreated back to the safety of the hut.

They said goodbye to Hagrid and left back to the dorms. On the way, Blaise immediately asked what was on his mind.

"The Sorcerer's Stone?"

"Yep," Harry replied.

"Well, spending time with you seems to be interesting at least." Harry snorted.

"Yeah, you could say that."

"So you really think you-know-who is out there?"

"He must be," Harry replied. "And that would explain my vision. Although, why can I see Voldemort?" Blaise didn't have an answer. And Harry wasn't sure if he wanted one.

The next couple weeks seemed to fly by, and before Harry knew it, his exams were upon him. He was sitting at breakfast with Blaise and had just asked him what he thought about Hermione. Blaise gave Harry a long look, then shrugged and stuffed a piece of toast into his mouth.

"Really Blaise, that's disgusting. You should try to at least chew, not inhale," said Lily Moon as she sat across from them. Blaise swallowed the toast, picked up his goblet, inclined it slightly in Lily's direction, and drank deeply. Lily glared and turned to Harry. But Harry was waiting for just the right moment. He would finally get revenge on the prank of Blaise's. Blaise had just tilted his head back to finish off the pumpkin juice, then—

"Millicent, Blaise was looking for you," Harry called, waving over Blaise's shoulder. His timing couldn't have been better. Blaise choked on the rest of the juice and it spilled over him as he darted under the table to hide. Lily cracked a smile.

"Lily, what can I do you for— errr— do for you?" Harry asked with an impish grin. He was feeling rather troublesome today.

"You're rather troublesome today," Lily noted. Harry smirked and had speared a piece of sausage on his fork. Blaise had resurfaced by now and was glaring at Harry in earnest. Harry pointed the sausage at Blaise and started shaking it menacingly.

"Did you really think I would let you get away with that prank unpunished?" Harry asked and he proceeded to eat his breakfast.

"But Millicent, Potter? You know she's been following me around lately. It's givin' me the creeps."

"She seems nice enough," Lily commented.

"Li'y woul' kno', 'hey 'are a 'orm room," Harry said through mouthfuls. Lily pointed her wand at Harry.

"Scourgify," she said briskly. Harry's breakfast was vanished from his mouth. He glared at Lily who gave him a condescending smile.

"You shouldn't talk with your mouth full, it's rude," she said. Harry gave a grunt of acknowledgement and bit into his bacon.

"But he's right Blaise, I would know. Seeing as how she's my dorm mate." Blaise merely groaned and put his head in his hands.

"Hi Mi'icen'," Harry said cheerfully. Lily looked about ready to scold him again.

"I'm not falling for that agai—"

"Hi Blaise," Millicent Bulstrode said cheerfully as she occupied the space next to Blaise's arm. Blaise let out a manly, high-pitched scream and jumped from the table, knocking his goblet of pumpkin juice over.

"I've got to change," he said shortly and fled.

"Was it something I said?" Millicent asked. Harry could only laugh through mouthfuls of bacon, but he stopped rather quickly when he faced the end of Lily's wand.

Harry excused himself and ran into Hermione, who was in panic mode for the testing day. He talked to her a bit, to let her know that he now thought someone was stealing the Stone for Voldemort, and before he knew it, he had pulled her into an empty classroom and was rambling.

"Someone wants the Stone to bring back Voldemort. Firenze, a centaur, told me in as many words that Voldemort wants it. That's the only thing that makes sense. And Bane and Ronan were mad because Firenze told me and that the heavens foretold it or some rubbish. Voldemort must be prophesized to come back or something. And they said something like the war had already been lost once. But that didn't make sense. We haven't lost really. But we've got to keep an eye on the bloody thing because the year's almost up and he's running out of time to steal it."

"With Dumbledore here it should be safe, Harry," she said once she was sure Harry was finished. Harry had to admit she had a point.

"And that's another thing. I never told you, but during the Quidditch match I saw Quirrell trying to curse me. Snape was trying to stop him. You reckon maybe it could be Quirrell?"

"But why did Snape go to see Fluffy when the troll came out?"

"Good point."

"Besides, of course Snape would try to stop him, you're a Slytherin. But why would Quirrell try to curse you? And how do you even know?"

"He kept saying words and never blinked the whole time. Snape was doing the same."

"Well, I guess you're right."

"I'll let you know of any further developments. Good luck with exams. Also, Blaise knows too," Harry said quickly and ran off before she could respond. Harry had his first written exam to get to anyway. They were in a large classroom with special Anti-Cheating quills. It was incredibly hot and Harry was thankful when he finished.

The practical exams were next. Professor Flitwick called them up one by one to see if they could make a pineapple tap-dance across a desk. Professor McGonagall had them all turning a mouse into a snuffbox—and she gave points based on how pretty the box looked, but you lost points if it had any whiskers. Snape continuously made them sweat, breathing down their necks while they tried to remember how to make a Forgetfulness potion.

Whenever he neared Harry's cauldron Harry would have an increasingly powerful headache. He started thinking darkly about drowning Snape in his cauldron—

"Five points from Slytherin, Potter!" Harry stared into Snape's eyes. It would be so easy. Just pick up the greasy git by his thrice cursed hair and shove his face into the potion. Harry allowed a contented smile to appear on his face. Snape seemed furious. Harry had the sobering thought that only divine intervention would allow him to pass Potions this year. And that was because Harry was in Slytherin. Hate Harry, he did, but not more than the reputation of his own house. At least, Harry hoped so. He gulped nervously and continued stirring.

The last exam was History of Magic. It was dreadfully boring, writing about wizards long dead, goblins long forgotten, and wars long over, but the test was finally finished and Harry couldn't help but cheer with the class.

Harry found himself in the company of Hermione and almost immediately regretted it. She began going on about the exams and Harry felt the need to cut her off.

"I've already taken them once; please don't make me relive them." She looked shocked and turned red, but bit her lip and nodded.

They walked towards the lake and sat down where they were joined by Blaise. There was a tense couple of moments between the Slytherin and the Gryffindor, but it subsided.

"The famous Zabini neutrality back in action," Harry commented airily as he stretched himself out on the grass.

Blaise smirked. "Who said it was ever out of action?"

"Touché," Harry said. "Hey do you get the feeling that you're— I dunno— forgetting something?"

"All the time, mate," Blaise responded.

"That's just the exams," Hermione said soothingly. "I woke up last night and was halfway through revising for Transfiguration before I remembered we'd done that one."

"Yeah but Granger, you don't count. You probably just moved on to next year's work." Hermione huffed.

Harry knew the feeling didn't have anything to do with exams. If he could just figure it out. He stared absentmindedly at the owl flying towards Hogwarts with a note clutched in its mouth. Harry wished he would get letters from people. Hagrid was the only person to have sent him a letter— well, technically McGonagall, but still, Hagrid seemed to care. McGonagall... he couldn't figure her out. It was like she had some kind of motive he couldn't discover yet. Maybe she really wanted him to be in Gryffindor? After all, he was brave enough. Maybe not reckless enough, but brave enough. It wasn't like he backed down from a three-headed dog.

Harry jumped to his feet.

"We've got to go to Hagrid's right now," Harry said urgently. His face had turned white.

"Why?" Hermione asked, while Blaise said "We?"

"Don't you think it's odd that the one thing Hagrid has ever wanted was a dragon, and someone just happens to give it to him? How many people wander around with dragon's eggs in their pockets? A bit lucky they ran into Hagrid wouldn't you say?"

Blaise looked at Harry in confusion. Harry quickly explained the story of the dragon while the three of them ran to Hagrid's.

"I think you're on to something there," Blaise said at the end of it.

Hagrid was sitting in an armchair outside his house; his trousers and sleeves were rolled up and he was whittling something as he whistled cheerfully.

"Hullo," he said, smiling. "Finished yer exams? Got time fer a cuppa?"

"We're in a bit of a hurry, Hagrid. I've got to ask you something. You know that night you won Norbert? What did the stranger you were playing cards with look like?" Harry asked quickly.

"Dunno," said Hagrid casually. "Never saw his face. He didn't take his cloak off."

Harry looked at Blaise and Hermione significantly.

"Now, it's not that unusual, yeh get a lot o' funny folk down at the Hog's Head—the pub down in the village. Mighta bin a dragon dealer, mightn' he?"

But Harry knew he was onto something now. And it definitely wasn't good. He sunk down onto the porch next to Hagrid.

"What did the two of you talk about, Hagrid? Did you mention Hogwarts or anything like that?" he asked, already knowing and fearing the answer.

"Mighta come up," Hagrid said thoughtfully, frowning as he tried to remember. "Yeah, I s'pose so. He was interested in what kinda animals I looked after an' all. O' course, I said I'd always wanted me a dragon. I don' remember a whole lot... he kept buyin' me drinks... Let's see... yeah... he mentioned he had a dragon egg an' we could play fer it if I wanted... but he had ter be sure I could handle it. Couldn't give a dragon to just anybody now could yeh? After Fluffy, I said, a dragon ain't nothin'."

Harry's heart sank.

"Did he seem— interested—in Fluffy?" Blaise asked, picking up on Harry's line of inquiry. Hagrid's head swiveled.

"Well o' course. Not everyday yeh come across a three-headed dog is it? I told him, Fluffy's a piece o' cake if yeh know how to handle him, jus' play him a bit o' music an' he'll go straight off ter sleep—"

Hagrid's horrified expression would have been comical in any other situation except the current one.

"I shouldn'ta told yeh that!" he blurted out. "Forget I said it! Hey—where're yeh goin'?"

They sprinted back to the entrance hall.

"Well that's that," Harry said with a note of finality in his voice. "Whoever's trying to steal the Stone—" Hermione shot him a look, because he had never shared with Blaise the thought that it was either their Head of House or Quirrell who were their prime suspects, "will make a move soon. We should go to Dumbledore. Come on. He'll know what to do."

The three of them moved inside and Harry led the way towards Dumbledore's office. Harry's feet led him straight to the gargoyle statue even though he knew he had never been there before. He stared at the entrance and wondered on the password.

"The password is some sort of sweet," Harry muttered to himself. Again, the information just presented itself and Harry knew it was correct.

"Sugar quills, cockroach clusters, lemon drops, acid pops, fizzing whizbees," Harry said to no avail. Hermione and Blaise joined in until "chocolate frog," proved to be the correct answer. The gargoyle sprang suddenly to life and hopped aside as the wall behind him split in two. Behind a wall was a spiral staircase that was moving smoothly upward, like an escalator. Once they stepped on the staircase the wall closed behind them with a thud. The trio rose upwards in circles, higher and higher until a gleaming oak door with a brass knocker in the shape of a griffin was all that was left.

They stepped off the stone staircase and rapped on the door. It opened with little resistance and they found themselves in a large and beautiful circular room, full of funny little noises. Dumbledore had various trinkets and silver instruments strewn about that

seemed haphazard at best, yet they all seemed to serve some sort of purpose. Little puffs of smoke were emitting from some of his instruments and Harry's eyes followed the smoke to the portraits of different witches and wizards, all of whom were apparently headmasters and headmistresses in their day, and not one of them was awake at the moment. Harry's eyes strayed to an enormous, claw-footed desk, but what caught his attention was sitting on a shelf behind it, a shabby, tattered wizard's hat– the Sorting Hat. The image of the giant snake that had plagued Harry on the night of the Sorting reappeared, only the details were less hazy. He went into a sort of trance as he saw himself pulling a magnificent looking sword out of the Sorting Hat.

A squawk pulled Harry out of his musings. To his left was a golden perch, upon which sat a magnificent looking bird. "Fawkes," Harry breathed. The bird gave him an inquisitive look and sang a few notes. Hermione's face became instantly tranquil and peaceful. Blaise's seemed unaffected. But Harry–

"Harry!" his two friends cried. He had collapsed onto the floor. His heart felt fit to burst and he wanted to die. His courage fled him and he cowered on the floor, then the singing stopped. Harry shook himself and the phoenix locked eyes with him. It flew across the room and grasped the Sorting Hat on its talons before placing it upon Harry's head.

"Ah... Mr. Riddle, what are you doing here?"

Chapter Six: ...And Your Enemies Closer

"Ah... Mr. Riddle, what are you doing here?" spoke the Sorting Hat in Harry's mind.

"Riddle..." Harry hissed menacingly. "That's not my name." he growled angrily.

"It was at one time. But, what is this? How did I not notice this before when I sorted you?"

"Leave me, Gideon. Now is not the time, nor the place for your interference. I have plans tonight. I have been waiting all year for this. You will not stop me."

The hat burst into flames, but Fawkes had managed to save it before any damage occurred to it. Harry sat up straighter, his eyes glinting a fierce red.

"I'm going after the Stone tonight," Harry said.

Blaise stared at Harry as if he had grown a second head.

"You could get killed Harry, or worse, expelled," Hermione said shrilly. Blaise raised an eyebrow.

"So are you going to keep him from doing something Gryffindorish, Granger?"

Hermione glared. Ignoring Blaise, she continued. "I'm sure you could use our help. We'll leave tonight after dinner."

"Our help?" Blaise asked. "I didn't exactly sign up for this."

But Harry wasn't paying attention to either one of them. His thoughts were no longer his own, and he allowed himself to be led back to the common room. On the way back, they ran into Professor McGonagall.

"Is Professor Dumbledore here?" Hermione asked rather bravely.

"Why do you ask, Miss Granger?" McGonagall asked suspiciously.

"She had a question about Muggle candies, Professor," lied Harry smoothly, although the word Muggle seemed to slide out of his mouth slightly distastefully.

"I see," McGonagall said, her mouth slightly upturned. "He is rather fond of those candies," she conceded. "Well, regardless, it will have to wait, Miss Granger. Professor Dumbledore received an urgent owl from the Ministry of Magic and flew off for London at once."

Hermione glanced at both Harry and Blaise, and when it was apparent neither was going to say anything else—

"It's actually about the Sorcerer's Stone," she blurted out. Blaise raised an eyebrow at Hermione, and he could be heard distinctly muttering: "Gryffindor," and shaking his head sadly.

McGonagall dropped the books she was holding from shock but she didn't even bother to pick them up.

"How do you know—?" she sputtered.

"We believe that someone will attempt to steal the Stone," Blaise said, deciding the story was up anyway.

She eyed him with a mixture of shock, suspicion, and slight distrust as her eyes glazed across the gleaming Slytherin badge on his robes. But the look quickly vanished. McGonagall wasn't one for prejudices after all.

"Professor Dumbledore will be back tomorrow," she said finally. "How you came to find out about the Stone I don't know but rest assured there are numerous protections and enchantments that will prevent it from being stolen. Now," she said as she bent down to retrieve her fallen books, "I suggest you enjoy the nice weather. Do not be worried about matters that do not concern you," she said briskly with a hint of warning before walking off.

"It must be tonight then," Hermione said. "Dumbledore is out of the way, the timing couldn't be better."

"Who do you think it is, Granger?"

"Harry thought it was Sna—" Hermione gasped. Blaise felt someone else's presence.

"Good afternoon, Professor," Blaise said smoothly.

"Mr. Zabini," Snape returned with a nod as Blaise turned around to greet his professor.

"Might I inquire as to your present company? I was not aware that Slytherin and Gryffindor first years were apt to get along, as it were," Snape said with a rather twisted smile.

"I'm sure you'd be surprised at the number of first year Slytherins and Gryffindors that have 'gotten along,' as you say, in the past. Why, I believe my mother was once friends with a Slytherin before she discovered he was not whom she had originally believed him to be," Harry said. Snape flushed, before looking murderous. Harry watched as he took a breath to try and calm himself but it didn't happen. Harry locked eyes with Snape.

"You want to be more careful when speaking to your superiors, Potter," Snape spat distastefully.

Suddenly, Snape dropped to the floor clutching his forearm in agony. Harry's eyes flashed red and memories seemed to fly through his mind's eye.

"Severus," Harry greeted inside Snape's head. The projected image of Snape that was speaking with Harry looked furious but at the same time respectful. "My lord," he said warily, and after a bitter pause, bowed.

"I am going to obtain the Sorcerer's Stone. You are going to accompany me. Somehow, I am inhabiting Potter's body. You are going to prove your loyalty to me, Severus. Come," Harry snapped.

Snape was back on his feet and seemed pale. He spun around and began walking towards the corridor. Harry followed sedately, with Blaise and Hermione running to catch up. After Harry turned a corner Snape pulled out his wand and stunned both Blaise and Hermione as they rounded the corner. Harry merely gave a nod and continued to follow.

They arrived at the door and the three headed dog stared at them distrustfully. A magical harp lay at its feet, which Snape immediately enchanted and the dog returned to its slumber. The trapdoor opened with a wave of Snape's wand and he gestured for Harry to enter first. Harry shook his head and Snape sighed before jumping through. As Harry followed after him a flash of white flew by his head before he could make it out.

"Devil's Snare?" Harry scoffed as he landed on the plant. "Child's play. A trio of first years could get by this. Dumbledore really is losing his touch." Harry waved his wand and an enormously powerful fire spell erupted from the end of it, literally incinerating the plant.

They walked forward in silence, Snape in the lead. They arrived upon a room full of flying keys. Two brooms were lined against the wall.

"Do they really expect me to fly on a broom?" Harry gave a cold, high-pitched laugh.

"Finite Incantatem," Harry roared, and the keys stopped mid-flight and collapsed onto the ground. Snape's eyes momentarily widened. Harry looked swiftly through the keys and found the correct one before opening the door.

The next chamber was very dark and they couldn't see anything. They were standing on the edge of a huge chessboard, behind the black chessmen, which were all carved from a beautiful black stone. Similarly cut stood the white pieces across from them.

"A chess match?" Harry snorted. "The last time this occurred I had been playing Grindelwald," he muttered to himself. "Severus, take the place of that bishop there. This shall be quick." Harry took the place of the king and started the match.

"Pawn to E4," Harry called once the white pieces had moved.

Another pawn countered. "Severus, move diagonally three squares to the left."

A knight was moved on the opposite end.

"Queen to F3," Harry ordered. White moved a pawn to threaten Severus.

"My Lord," Snape started quietly.

"Quiet!" Harry shouted. "Queen to F7." Harry allowed a smirk to cross his features. "Checkmate."

They walked swiftly passed the chessboard and entered the next room. A troll was lying unconscious on the floor.

"Someone's here," Harry growled. His eyes flashed dangerously. Snape took a hesitant step forward. They entered the final room and flames sprang to life.

"Potions," Harry drawled. "This would be yours, Severus. Do not worry, it's quite simple. Our mysterious trespasser obviously survived this obstacle. So that little bottle that is nearly empty is the correct one. Give it here." Harry waved his wand and duplicated the contents, passing the copy to Snape.

"Drink," he ordered. Snape complied. "Now walk through and I shall follow." Snape treaded carefully and walked through the fire. The copied potion worked and Harry followed behind Snape, glaring. He came face to face with Quirrell in the next room.

"Severus?" Quirrell asked hesitantly. "And Potter? What are you doing here?" Harry absently noted that there was no trace of a stutter.

"Quirrell, you blabbering idiot. Get away from the mirror. The Stone is mine." Harry snapped his fingers and Snape cursed Quirrell who was too shocked to prevent himself from losing his wand. Harry snapped his fingers again and Quirrell was incarcerated.

"Now, I imagine the Stone is inside the mirror..." Harry trailed off. "How do I get it?"

Harry approached the mirror and looked into it. He saw himself with the Stone; saw himself powerful beyond his wildest dreams, his eyes a permanent red.

"I see myself using the Stone..."

"Severus..." a voice spoke into the darkness. Both Harry and Snape froze at the sound. It was coming from the back of Quirrell's turban.

"My Lord?" Snape asked questioningly.

"Release me, Severus," the voice said. Snape shakily complied and Quirrell removed the turban, revealing the face of Voldemort on the back.

"What is going on here, Quirrell?" Harry asked. "I do not have patience. I have a Stone to acquire and you are in my way. I should kill you now."

"Harry Potter," the face whispered.

"I am not Harry Potter," Harry began, "At least not in spirit. What do you claim to be? You are a wreck of a wizard. You are no more worthy of this Stone than the incompetent moron you are possessing."

"You fool! I am the greatest Sorcerer of all time! I am Lord Voldemort!"

"Lies," Harry snapped. "I am the greatest Sorcerer of all time. Do not dare claim to be me you arrogant twat." Harry felt a presence in his mind and he attacked viciously. Harry duly registered someone cry out in pain and heard a body collapse to the floor.

"What is this?" Voldemort cried.

"Magic," Harry said simply with a smirk. "But this cannot be. We seem to be the same person." Harry walked forward hesitantly, until he was mere inches from Voldemort's face. They stared at each other. But suddenly, Harry's body gave a violent spasm and his eyes flashed a brilliant green. His hands latched themselves onto Voldemort's face and an unholy scream ripped through the silence. The spirit of Voldemort flew at Harry while a stunner nailed Harry in the back before he lost consciousness.

When Harry came to, he found himself in the hospital wing. Snape was staring at him, an unreadable expression on the professor's face.

"Who are you?" Snape asked finally. Harry blinked.

"Do not make me ask you again," Snape said softly, gripping his wand under his robes.

"You know perfectly well who I am, Snivellus," Harry said, glaring. Snape's wand was in Harry's face extremely fast. But Harry was quicker. His wand had leapt into his hand and was pointed right back at Snape.

"Potter," Snape said, spitting the word like an insult. "You know more than you should."

"Old habits die hard, Sevvv."

"You will cease this mockery you make of me, Potter. Ten points from Slytherin," Snape said fiercely.

"Do I really look like I care about house points? Honestly? LOOK AT ME SNAPE!" Against his will Snape's eyes locked with Harry's.

"From the first day I walked in here you have treated me like a Gryffindor, as if I were James Potter reincarnate. I am not, and you would do well to remember that. It could save your life one day."

"I will not be talked to like that, Potter."

"What happened with the respect you showed me earlier. I thought I was your highly exalted lord," Harry said. He was pleased to see Snape was shaken.

"Do not speak of things you have no knowledge of."

"You'd be surprised of the things I know, Snape. More than I should at the very least. And not just what you think. Something broke in me earlier. I'm remembering things that I should have known before." For some inexplicable reason Snape looked very nervous. But it was true. Harry's memories had started returning to him. He started knowing things he had no possible way of knowing.

"Ah, Harry, you're awake," said Professor Dumbledore. The deputy headmistress, McGonagall, followed in his wake as the two approached Harry's bed.

"What happened down there, Mr. Potter?"

"He attacked me, Dumbledore! I want this insolent brat expelled! And I'll do it!" A manic gleam appeared in Snape's eyes, and an odd, twisted sort of smile appeared on his face. "I'm his head of house," Snape said slowly.

"Brilliant, Snape. Took you all year to figure that one out did it?" Harry muttered.

"That happy power resides with me..."

"Severus, now now. Allow Harry an explanation. It would not look good to have to expel one of your own students after all," Dumbledore said with a twinkle in his eye. Snape fought some sort of internal battle with himself before allowing his shoulders to slump slightly. His eyes still glared unerringly at Harry.

"Well, Snape att—"

"Professor Snape, Harry," Dumbledore chided absentmindedly.

"That's what I said. He attacked Blaise and Hermione when we were following him to the third-floor corridor."

Dumbledore looked sharply at Snape and returned his gaze to Harry.

"Very well, please continue."

"We got to the trapdoor and Snape enchanted a harp to put Fluffy to sleep and we entered the trapdoor. Underneath we landed on Devil's Snare and a quick incendio freed us."

"A quick incendio, Mr. Potter? The Devil's Snare was obliterated!" McGonagall said, her voicing rising incredulously.

"Next we came into the room with the flying keys. A Finite Incantatem later and they were all on the floor and I found the correct one to take us to the next room."

To say McGonagall was stunned would have been an understatement.

"A simple Finite Incantatem would not have taken care of the enchantments on those keys, Potter."

"Well it certainly did. The evidence lies on the floor of that chamber. Anyway, the next room was the chess set. I took the place of the King and Snape was a bishop." Harry took great relish in his next statement. "Beat it in four moves and went onto the next corridor." His voice was carefully controlled, but one could almost sense Harry's excitement. Harry smirked as McGonagall looked flabbergasted. She mouthed "four moves," to herself before staring at Harry with a strange look in her eye.

"The troll was already disposed of and in the last room, Snape's potion was already mostly drunk so I grabbed the nearly empty bottle and Snape and I both drank it before entering the final room with the mirror.

"Quirrell was there and we subdued him and I looked into the mirror. The Stone was in the mirror wasn't it, Professor?" Harry asked curiously. Dumbledore allowed a small smile to grace his face.

"Ah, one of my more brilliant ideas if I do say so myself, and between you and me, that is saying something. You see only someone who wanted to find the Stone, not use it— would be able to get it, and otherwise they would just see themselves using the Stone."

"No wonder," Harry muttered to himself. So now he knew how to get the Stone. He could return later. McGonagall was gazing at Harry as though she had never seen him plainly before. Harry's face was full of an almost wild happiness that didn't exactly enhance his features but made them, somehow, less human.

"You should get some rest, Mr. Potter." Dumbledore said finally, his eyes looking troubled. The headmaster looked much older than he had when he first entered the room. He and McGonagall left briskly, but Snape remained.

"You did not inform them about Voldemort," Harry stated quite plainly.

Snape twitched. "No, I did not."

"Was that Voldemort inside of Quirrell?" Snape didn't say anything for quite some time. He looked like he was having trouble remembering. And now that Harry thought about it, the Potions Master seemed to have been too quiet, as if he couldn't remember everything.

"Yes," he said finally.

"How is that possible?" Harry asked.

"The Dark Lord has many –abilities – that you could not begin to understand."

"You don't remember what happened down there." It wasn't a question. Snape jerked out of his thoughts and searched Harry's face. He abruptly jerked his head downward. Harry swiftly entered Snape's mind and discovered that he, Snape, was the presence he had attacked in the room with the mirror. He must have obliterated Snape's memories of the confrontation.

"You would do well to learn your place, Potter. You will not stop me." Snape stared. Harry was the one who had spoken. Suddenly Harry's mind was under attack. He realized belatedly some sort of steel dome was in his subconscious and there were memories locked in there. A dark presence was surrounding the dome, preventing Harry from accessing it.

Harry stared at the figure inside his mind, preventing him from remembering his own thoughts. The figure stared right back. Wands materialized in midair and the figure shouted the killing curse. Harry had no idea what would happen if he was hit by a killing curse in his own mind. He dodged and fired back his personal favorite, the Disarming spell. Belatedly, he realized someone behind him was hit with the green light. The battle ended abruptly and Harry only saw black.

The next time he came to, Blaise Zabini was sitting there staring at him questioningly. Lily Moon was across from him and Tracey Davis was staring blankly out the window.

Harry let out a groan and looked up at the trio of Slytherins. Lily came over to his bed and smacked him upside the head.

"What were you thinking?"

"Clearly he wasn't," contributed Tracey.

"What I want to know," Blaise began slowly, "is how you managed to get Snape to go with you through the trapdoor."

"He stunned you and Hermione, didn't he?" Harry asked. Blaise nodded.

"Where did you two go from there? And what happened to the—" Harry cut him off with a wave of his hand.

"We went through all the obstacles and found Quirrell at the end. He's dead," Harry said flatly.

"Oh," Blaise said.

"You missed the match, Harry," Tracey said. "You were out in the hospital wing for a few days. Higgs played in your place. Slytherin lost. Flint was furious. I'm not sure if you'll be able to play Seeker next year."

"Well if I'm the best option he won't have much choice now will he?" Harry said with a bit of a cocky grin appearing on his face. Lily chucked a Chocolate Frog at him. Harry threw back a pillow.

"Dumbledore wanted to talk to you again by the way. He said he'd stop by an hour ago," Blaise said.

"I did indeed," Dumbledore said, walking into the hospital wing.

"Professor," Harry said respectfully.

"If I could have a few words with Mr. Potter please," Dumbledore requested. The three Slytherins obliged and after waving to Harry and promising to stop in later, departed.

"Something doesn't quite match up with the story you told me, Harry."

"Oh?" Harry asked.

"Professor Snape seems incapable of recalling his version of the events that transpired the other day."

"Is he losing his mind, Professor?" asked Harry, proud that his face looked quite serious and surprised that his voice even managed to create a note of concern. Dumbledore's bottom lip twitched.

"I daresay that Professor Snape's mind is in better condition than my own on some occasions." Harry stared, mouth agape. Dumbledore really was off his rocker.

"Professor Quirrell is dead isn't he?"

Dumbledore gave him a calculating look. "Yes," he said finally.

"And— I killed him?" Harry asked, although he already knew the answer. Dumbledore sighed heavily.

"Quirrell could not bear to touch you. His soul experienced mortal agony because of the mark left on you. No not your scar," Dumbledore added as Harry's hand had unconsciously reached to his forehead. "A mark that goes deeper than your skin. Your mother died to save you, Harry. And her love protects you, even to this very day."

Dumbledore looked away respectfully to give Harry time to organize his thoughts and emotions.

"I met Vol— You-Know-Who—"

"Call him Voldemort, Harry. Always use the proper name for things. Fear of a name increases fear of the thing itself."

"Yes sir. Voldemort then. He was down there, trying to get the Stone."

"Yes, I must confess I feared that was the case. Quirinus had been acting odd lately. I daresay that by sharing his soul with Voldemort, he doomed himself to his own fate. Voldemort cannot understand love. He believes it is for fools, people too weak to seek power choose to search out love from a desire to compensate for something they cannot obtain. But love is powerful in its own right; more so than Voldemort will ever understand."

"You talk about Voldemort in the present tense. You still think he's out there?"

"I suspect that yes, Voldemort's quest to return to power has not ended. He has only been delayed for the moment. But as long as people are prepared to fight what seems a losing battle, he will continue to be delayed again, and again. On another note, how have you enjoyed your year?"

"Well, it could have been better," Harry replied truthfully. "Slytherin is a bit— difficult to handle when you're the boy-who-lived."

"Ah," Dumbledore said intelligently. "Perhaps I can be of help?"

"Not that I know of Professor. But thank you. There's one last question I'd like to ask you though... and I'd like the truth."

"The truth." Dumbledore let out another sigh that revealed his age more than appearance could possibly show. "It is a beautiful and terrible thing, and should therefore be treated with great caution. It's rather ironic, what most people want is that which they are sometimes incapable of handling. Similar to the Stone. Eternal life and wealth for the user. Such a dream for many humans, yet those who would seek to use it would be corrupted by the power they sought. All the money and life you could want! The two things most humans would choose above all— the trouble is, humans do have a knack of choosing precisely those things that are worst for them. But I digress. You said you had a question to ask of me. I will try and be as truthful as possible, although you must understand there are certain things I can't tell you. If this is the case, however, I will tell you so. I will not lie to you."

"Why did Voldemort first try to kill me? What really happened that night?"

"I cannot tell you, Harry. Alas, I will one day tell you, but not now. When you are older, you shall know. As for what happened that night. Voldemort was told of the location of your parents by Sirius Black. They had been under the Fidelius Charm, which is a charm that is cast and utilizes a secret-keeper. The secret-keeper is a person whom is told a secret, in this case the residence of your family, and that secret is buried inside their very soul. People could have their noses pressed to your window and still not know you were even there! A very powerful charm indeed. Alas, it depends on the reliability of the secret-keeper. We had long suspected a traitor among your father's friends. Once I realized Voldemort had discovered your house, I knew that the secret-keeper was in fact the traitor. And the secret-keeper was Sirius Black."

"Who was this Sirius Black? He sounds familiar."

"He was your father's best friend. To this day, I still don't understand why he betrayed them to Voldemort, and I am saddened that I was unable to do more for them." A small tear glistened in Dumbledore's eye and it landed in his beard.

"So Voldemort came in and killed my parents."

"That is correct. Your father was killed first, and then he came to your room and he killed your mother, who had died protecting you, as was evident from the way the room appeared. He then tried to kill you, but the sacrifice your mother made forced the killing curse to rebound upon him, leaving that scar on your forehead."

"If the killing curse hit him," Harry said slowly, "why didn't he die?"

"That, is a question I am unable to answer. I have my guesses, but I am not sure. Voldemort fears death above anything else. As was made apparent the other night, one way or another he managed to survive that killing curse as well."

"There's something else..."

"Fire away."

"What happened to the Stone?"

"It has been destroyed."

"Destroyed? Flamel will die then won't he?"

Dumbledore's face lit up. "You found out about Nicolas?" He really sounded delighted. "You really did do the thing properly. Well, we've had a chat, and he really seems agreed that destroying it was for the best."

"So he will die."

"Yes, Harry. He will die. I'm sure it seems incredible for you, young as you are, to understand but to Nicolas and his wife, Perenelle, it is much more like going to bed after a very, very long day. After all, to the well-organized mind, death is but the next great adventure."

"Do you think Professor Snape believes that? After all, you said his mind is more organized than yours." Dumbledore chuckled.

"I believe you would have to ask Professor Snape that question, Harry."

"Can I ask you one more question?"

"I believe you already have, but you are free to ask one other if you wish."

"Do you know who stunned me?" Dumbledore looked at Harry slightly confused.

"I'm sorry Harry, I'm not quite sure I understand."

"Someone stunned me right after Quirrell died. One second I had my hands on his face, the next I was hit by a spell."

"I'm not quite sure, Harry. It is possible Professor Snape stunned you to save you from harm, but it seems as though Voldemort was able to remove Professor Snape's memories of the altercation down below. Rest assured that no harm will come to you in these walls while you are under my care."

"This is a school for magic, Professor. Is that really a promise you want to make?" Harry asked skeptically. Dumbledore looked at Harry sharply. Harry felt quite nervous.

"Sorry," he said quickly. "I didn't mean to imply—"

"I take the safety of my students as my utmost priority, Mr. Potter. Please don't believe for a second that that is otherwise."

"Yes sir," Harry said.

"Now I believe I will take my leave, and I shall see you at the leaving feast. Try not to worry Madam Pomfrey too much. She doesn't take kindly to her patients leaving the confines of her wing."

"Yes sir," Harry said again. Dumbledore spared Harry a small smile to let him know he was forgiven and left Harry to his musings.

After a good night's sleep, Harry felt ready to return to life at Hogwarts.

"I want to go to the feast," Harry said for what seemed like the thousandth time that morning.

Pomfrey sighed. "Yes, yes, I realize that Mr. Potter. And Professor Dumbledore has seen fit to inform me that you are to go. But you are no where near well enough. But my opinion of the state of health of my patients obviously has no bearings on whether or not they are fit to leave. And you have a visitor."

"Really? Who?"

Hagrid walked into the room as he asked. Harry wondered how he had managed to fit through the door. He sat down next to Harry and burst into tears. Harry looked on in surprise.

"It's— all — my— ruddy— fault!" he sobbed into his hands. "I told 'em how ter get past Fluffy! He didn't know how an' I told the evil git. All fer a dragon's egg. I'll never ruddy drink again! I deserve ter be chucked out and made ter live as a Muggle."

"Hagrid it's okay. Everything's fine now. He would have found out one way or another. Cheer up. It's all right. As soon as Pomfrey let's

me out anyway," Harry added darkly. Hagrid smiled through his tears.

"I have somethin' fer yeh."

"It's not a stoat sandwich is it?"

Hagrid gave a weak chuckle. "How'd yeh—? Never mind, yeh always know things you aren't s'posed to know." At Harry's shocked expression Hagrid grinned. "I'm kiddin'. Although I can get yeh one if yeh want," he added brightly. Harry shook his head. "Here. Dumbledore gave me the day off ter put it together."

Harry's hands were filled with a handsome, leather-covered book. He opened it curiously and saw his parents waving at him from the pages. Hagrid said something but Harry couldn't hear him. He was mesmerized by the photographs. Hagrid understood.

Harry made his way down to the leaving feast after dodging Pomfrey's wand and sprinted down the hall. He was winded fairly quickly but managed to compose himself before walking in. The Great Hall was already full, and all talking stopped when he walked into the room. He made his way to the table, sitting next to Blaise, whom had saved him a seat, and then the chattering began anew in hushed tones. Harry didn't have to use legilimency to know that they were talking about him.

The hall was decked out in the Gryffindor colors of red and gold to celebrate their upset victory over Slytherin; Snape's constant removal of points from Harry obviously had managed to break their lead. Harry thought he had probably just given the points back to Malfoy as soon as Harry left but maybe he was wrong.

Dumbledore arrived mere moments later and after the students noticed him, everyone quieted down.

"Another year gone," he said wearily. "Before we begin on this delicious feast I just have a couple of things to tell you. But first, what a year! I do hope we've succeeded in making your heads a bit fuller, although I'm sure you'll manage to empty them as you have all summer ahead of you..."

"Now, as for the house cup, I believe it needs to be awarded. In fourth place is Hufflepuff with three hundred and fifty-two points, in third is Ravenclaw, with four hundred and twenty-six, second place is Slytherin with four hundred and sixty points, and in first place is Gryffindor with four hundred and sixty-two points."

The whole hall excluding Slytherin cheered loudly. Snape's glare at Harry intensified. Snape had removed ten points from Harry in the hospital wing and that had cost them the cup.

"Yes, yes, well done Gryffindor," Dumbledore said as the houses all quieted. "However, recent events must be taken into account, and I have some last minute points to award."

The whole hall was stunned into silence. The Slytherins stared at the headmaster suspiciously.

"As I'm sure those of you know what happened down in the third-floor corridor, or at least have a general idea, I feel obligated to reward one Mr. Harry Potter, for sheer cunning and outstanding courage. I award Slytherin house ten points."

The looks on the members of the other three houses were priceless. Their faces were crestfallen. Harry looked up at Professor McGonagall. Her lips were the thinnest Harry had seen them yet. Slytherins yelled up and down the table, banging their goblets and congratulating Harry, finally appearing proud to have him in their midst.

"This means," Dumbledore continued, "a change of decorations are in order." He clapped his hands and the hall was decorated in Slytherin green and silver, and the huge Slytherin serpent replaced the towering Gryffindor lion at the head table. Snape whispered something into Dumbledore's ear.

"As Professor Snape has been so kind to inform me, this is the seventh year in a row that Slytherin house has won the house cup. Congratulations Slytherin." Snape was shaking McGonagall's hand with a twisted sort of smile. He caught Harry's eye and Harry knew that Snape's feelings of hatred were still present, but there was something akin to respect, or possibly fear, in his eyes. Thinking about Snape, he still had to figure out a lot of things regarding the greasy git. It would have to wait till next year. For now, he was the

celebrity of Slytherin house, which would irk Snape to no end, he was sure. So he would take what he could get, and just enjoy the evening.

Exam results arrived before they left, and Harry managed to pass with one of the top marks in his year. Of course, Potions was only an Acceptable. Harry had a feeling Dumbledore had stepped in to keep Snape from outright failing him. Harry decided he would try and make Snape give him an Outstanding on one of his assignments. It would be a goal for next year.

Soon it was time to leave and everything was packed; notes were handed out reminding them not to use magic; Hagrid led them back across the lake on the boats; they boarded the Hogwarts Express. Harry found a compartment with Lily, Blaise, and Tracey. Hermione joined them part way through, before leaving to return to her housemates so as not to be too ostracized next year.

They talked amiably enough, reveling in the freedom of going home. Lily told them about her twin brothers graduating and that they were planning on being shopkeepers in Knockturn Alley. Harry really started to warm up to the three of them and he felt like he had actually made some friends.

"So you never answered my question, Harry. Why did Snape go with you?" Blaise asked.

Harry was spared from answering when the compartment door opened and Draco Malfoy entered.

"Zabini," he said neutrally. Blaise inclined his head. "So Potter, I heard from my godfather that you tried to steal the Stone." Harry knew Malfoy was lying. There was no way that Snape could remember that, was there?

"I don't know what you're talking about Malfoy," Harry said and then bit into a Chocolate Frog.

"I think that you do, Potter. I think there was someone else with you too. The Dark Lord," Malfoy hissed.

"I think— that you think too much, Malfoy. You really don't want to strain your little brain. It has enough stress from trying to breathe and walk at the same time," Harry answered. Malfoy glared.

"This isn't over, Potter."

"Of course it isn't. We still have six more years." Malfoy just walked out, angry that he hadn't rattled Harry.

"Well that was- interesting," Hermione said at last.

"Wonder what made him think all that?" said Lily.

"Who knows?" Tracey said.

"Who cares?" Blaise added. Harry was inclined to agree. He had bigger things to deal with than Malfoy. Of course, it was all in his head. Once they pulled into platform nine and three-quarters at King's Cross, Harry knew he was in for a long summer.

"Well, hopefully we can get together sometime over the summer. What do you say, Potter?" Blaise asked. "I'll invite you guys too," Blaise added for Lily and Tracey's benefit. Hermione had already left to meet her parents. Harry sometimes got the feeling that they only tolerated Hermione because of Harry. But he never brought it up and neither did they.

"That sounds lovely, Blaise," Lily said with a smile.

"We'll just owl each other then," Tracey said.

"As opposed to Muggle mail?" Harry asked with a grin. He was treated to identical smacks on his arms by the two girls. Blaise smirked.

"There he is, Mom, there he is, look!"

It was Ginny Weasley, younger sister to the twins, but she wasn't pointing at her brothers.

"Harry Potter!" she squealed. "Look, Mom! I can see—"

"Be quiet, Ginny, and it's rude to point," her mother said. Harry looked at Blaise.

"What do you say we play the biggest prank of the century on the Weasel?" If Blaise's devious smile was anything to go by, Harry had a feeling he was agreeing.

Harry walked over to the youngest Weasley.

"Hi Ginny, I'm Harry. It's nice to meet you," he said politely. "Mrs. Weasley," he nodded. Her return nod was rather stiff. Apparently Weasley had been keeping his mother up to date on Harry's Dark Lord tendencies.

Ginny merely stared at Harry blankly. Her mouth was partially open and she looked at him in shock. Her eyes flicked to his forehead and he kept himself from sighing.

"I've heard a lot about you." It was a lie of course. But she didn't know that.

"Me?" she squeaked, then blushed crimson.

"Yup, and I hear your loads nicer than Ron. If it's ok with you, I'd like to be your friend. I don't really have anyone to write to this summer, and I'd like to write to you if that's ok." Ginny didn't trust herself to speak in his presence, it seemed like, and she merely nodded.

"Excellent," Harry said and clapped his hands. Ginny jumped. At that point, Weasel came up. "Potter, what are you doing talking to my sister? Are you trying to corrupt her? If you lay one bloody finger on her—"

"Ronald Weasley!" Mrs. Weasley shrieked. "That is no way to speak in public. I thought I taught you better manners than that. Looks like someone will be degnoming the garden when we get home." Ron looked at Harry darkly.

"Ginny, you want to stay away from Potter. He's an evil git."

"You don't know that, Ron! He's really nice and sweet and handso—" Ginny broke off, looking mortified at what she said, and hid behind her mother.

"Well I'll write you then. Have a good summer," Harry replied cheerfully, his smile breaking into a grin as he knew how much he was driving the Weasel crazy. Ron looked livid. "Mrs. Weasley, it was nice to meet you."

"Likewise, Harry dear," she said, although not very warmly. She obviously harbored ill feelings towards him because of Ron's letters, but couldn't find a fault in him at present. Harry smiled and walked back to Blaise.

"That was fun," Harry said.

"I noticed," Blaise replied dryly.

"Well, see you then. My relatives are here," Harry said, jerking his head at the direction of his purple-faced Uncle.

"Is your Uncle normally that purple?"

"Only when he's near magic." Vernon Dursley looked furious at the mention of the m-word.

"Ready are you, boy? I haven't got all day you know." Uncle Vernon, Aunt Petunia, and Dudley all walked back to the car, not waiting for Harry.

"Well, hope you have a good holiday then," Blaise said and they shook hands.

"Oh I will," Harry said. A feral grin worthy of a goblin appeared on his face. "They don't know I'm not allowed to do magic at home."

Book 2: Harry Potter and the Heir of Slytherin

Chapter Seven: Slytherin Manipulations

Harry had known the moment he left King's Cross with the Dursleys that if he wanted to have a good summer he was going to have to fight for it. He was fresh out of his first year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and after tasting eight and a half months or so of freedom, Harry was damned if he was going to slave away for the Dursleys ever again. That was why when they arrived at Number Four, Privet Drive, Harry already had his wand out and pointed at Vernon Dursley's enormously large neck.

"I'm going to make this painfully clear to you, Uncle Vernon. Pay attention because I will not be repeating myself. I want to be here as much as you want me to be here. So we are going to have an agreement. You will be leaving me alone, and I will stay out of your sight. All my belongings are going to come up with me to the bedroom, and Hedwig, my owl, will be given free reign to fly out as she pleases. If you violate any of the terms of our contract, I will be forced to use other means of keeping you in line. Are we clear?"

"Now see here, boy! You will not be telling me what to do in my house." Smarter men than Vernon Dursley would have known to not provoke men with the look in their eyes that Harry Potter currently had. However, Vernon Dursley was not known for his intellect.

"Do not push me, Dursley. You will not like the consequences." Uncle Vernon's face reached a previously unknown color of purple. Harry wondered if he should remind the man to breathe, but couldn't find it in himself to care. He grabbed his trunk from out of the car and walked to the smallest bedroom, ignoring his Uncle's incoherent sputtering as he passed by him.

Harry laid his belongings at the foot of the bed and pondered on his plans for the summer. He would have to get his homework out of the way, he wanted to annoy the bloody git, Ron Weasley, he also needed to order some new potions books to outwit Snape, and he would try to hang out with Blaise over the summer.

Weasley had seemed like a decent bloke at first, but once Harry had been sorted into Slytherin, that was that. Harry still had been getting strange memories of what seemed to be the future (it certainly

wasn't the past) ever since the Sorting Hat and touched his head. The strange thing was Harry had been a Gryffindor in those memories, so it must have been an alternate future, or something of the sort.

The other problem during his school year took the shape of Lord Voldemort. Harry, one way or another, believed he was in possession of at least a piece of the Dark Lord's soul. That was readily apparent when Harry manipulated Snape into going through the trap door and various enchantments to steal the Sorcerer's Stone, a magical item granting the user eternal life and gold. Harry's magical prowess had increased tenfold during those few hours of defeating enchantments and Harry had a feeling it wasn't just adrenaline that caused it.

Which brought him to his last problem: Harry's mind. He had been mentally attacked that night and some sort of entity in his head had taken the full extent of a killing curse. He had been dueling with some figure shrouded in darkness protecting a dome of what housed memories, and if Harry's guess was accurate, important, alternate future, memories. Something had crept up behind Harry and was hit with the killing curse, knocking Harry out cold. The only question that was left was who else had been in Harry's mind?

It was confusing and Harry decided he would read up on it later. For now, he would at least try to enjoy his summer.

So after sending Hedwig off to Diagon Alley with a list of books to purchase from the owl order sheet he had nicked off of Blaise at some point in the school year, Harry found himself writing a letter to Ginny Weasley.

Dear Ginny,

But that was all he had so far. He wasn't sure what to say or do. His rather ingenious plan was to try and get Ginny on his side, against Ron, for the perverse pleasure of tormenting the annoying Gryffindor. If she got sorted into Slytherin, well, bully for the Weasleys. But his main objective was to try and get back at Weasley, and his youngest sister was a prime target. He looked at the nearly blank parchment and held his quill above it, debating on what to write.

Dear Ginny,

First of all, don't believe a word Ron tells you. He is throwing it all out of proportion and proclaiming me the next Dark Lord I'm sure. But enough about that. As you can see, I'm not evil. All Slytherins aren't evil. Remember that.

Anyway, I just got back to my relatives' house. This should be an interesting summer. They're Muggles and believe me when I say that they are truly despicable. If all Muggles are like my relatives, well, I don't think we'd get along very well. The bright spot of this summer is that they don't know I'm not allowed to do magic. So I'll be able to threaten my way out of any severe punishments. Although I'm planning on muttering nonsense words under my breath to see their reactions. Should be quite comical.

Enough about me though. What about you? I know you already knew me from before the train station, I'm guessing you've heard the story of Harry Potter, Boy-Who-Lived. Well, let me tell you, it's really annoying to be the bloody Boy-Who-Lived. Famous because you're an orphan. Nobody leaves you alone— well, that's not entirely true. Most people don't leave you alone. Although it's more because I'm in Slytherin I think. To be quite honest, Slytherin house seems to be hated by everyone else. It's rather sad really. I had thought your brother was a friend until I was sorted into Slytherin. That was the end of that friendship. Ah well. I've met a couple of nice people. You included. So, what are your plans for the summer?

-Harry

P.S. My owl, Hedwig, can be a bit irritating if she's ignored.

Harry looked it over and tried hard not to burst out laughing. It was awful. But he knew she'd lap it up. He threw the sympathy card, and he let her know Slytherin wasn't bad. Imagining Weasel's face while his sister defended the Slytherins made Harry lose it. He burst out laughing and heard some silverware clatter down at the dinner table. This would be an interesting correspondence.

Harry passed the next few days waiting for Hedwig to return with his potions books by doing his homework. He was able to finish off Transfiguration fairly quickly; McGonagall had been fairly lenient for this break. Charms followed swiftly, and Harry had just cracked open his History of Magic book to write an essay when Hedwig swooped

in. He relieved her of the books and poured some owl treats into her cage.

The first book he opened, *Potion Brewing for Dummies*, helped him verify the basics and he only skimmed through it. He did learn a few good skills though, such as using the flat end of your dagger when trying to squeeze juice out of ingredients, and how certain ingredient combinations could be used to counteract any mistakes you make, as well as reduce side effects.

After he was satisfied that the book had helped as much as it could, he grabbed at the next book in the pile: *Reactions, Restrictions, and Recommendations: Potions Edition*, and cracked it open.

Before he started reading, he set Hedwig with the task of delivering his letter to Ginny.

The next week or so was spent reading through this book, which had proved to be an interesting read. It discussed in detail many different ingredients that could counter bad ingredients, or could help enhance other ones. For example, powdered root of asphodel helped to increase the potency of some potions, but reacted badly with hellebore due to the poisonous nature of the hellebore plant. However, if you were able to nullify the poison first, by heating up the cauldron and pouring the hellebore syrup into a bicorn horn, then adding in the asphodel, you were able to add a relaxing side effect to the potion that lasted quite longer than normal.

Essentially, the book said you needed to know what properties each ingredient had to know how they affected the potion. Then, you had to understand why some potions reacted badly with others, which basically is taken from the properties and discerned from there. Then, to counter reactions, you had to generally change the temperature to affect what you were adding to either increase or decrease its potency, then add in an ingredient that reacted well to both of the other ingredients, and the mix was generally enough to alter the nature of the badly reacted ingredients and caused the potion to not explode, which Harry deemed to be a good thing.

The book, although interesting, was not something he would buy for light reading. He wasn't Hermione Granger after all. But his mind explored the possibilities of becoming great at Potions, if only to piss off Snape.

Severus Snape. So many questions; so few answers. What did Snape have against Harry's parents, specifically his father? How did he forget all the events that happened when they went through the trapdoor? (Harry had a vague idea about that one though.) Why was Snape calling Voldemort "my Lord?" And most importantly, something completely unrelated to Snape, what was going on between Harry and Voldemort?

Harry had felt something inside him take over his body that day when he went after the Stone with Snape. He was almost— but no. Could he? Was Lord Voldemort a part of Harry? It was the only thing that made sense. And it answered so many questions. But it raised just as many. If it was Voldemort who was part of Harry, then that explained the attack on his soul when he was sorted, and it also explained the thing guarding his memories. But what had been hit by the killing curse in his mind? Harry really hadn't felt any different so far over the summer. But then, everything Harry thought he ever knew had been thrown out the door a year ago. What's to say that now wasn't any different?

Harry found himself beginning to go in circles and it was driving him crazy, if he wasn't already anyway. He finally pulled himself out of his musings to look at the letter Ginny had sent him a couple days ago.

Dear Harry,

Don't worry, I've known since I was four to not take everything Ron says as the truth. And I don't believe you're a Dark Lord either. You're too (here there was a word Harry couldn't quite read as it had been scratched out repeatedly) nice. So since I think you're nice, not all Slytherins can be evil can they?

Are the Muggles really that bad? My Dad is really quite fond of Muggles. That's his job actually, Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Department at the Ministry. He can be a bit of a nutter when it comes to Muggle things but that's Dad for you. Do be careful though, I don't want you to get in trouble. I've already heard from the twins how much trouble you get into at school. Did you really fight a troll and prank Professor Snape?

And... yes... I've heard of you before. I— I used to get read your story before I went to sleep ever since I was little. I'm— well— I always used to think I'd meet you someday, and it was really nice to finally meet you. I hope we can be friends. And I'm sorry about Ron not being your friend. He can be an insensitive git at times. Believe me, I've lived with him for almost eleven years.

As for the summer, I'm just waiting until my birthday so I can go get my school supplies. I'm very excited. :). Maybe I'll run into you at Diagon Alley?

Your friend,

Ginny

Harry didn't quite know what to think of the letter. On the one hand, it sounded like Ginny was definitely against her brother, but on the other he felt a twinge of guilt at using her solely for revenge.

His bitterness at Weasley outweighed his feelings of guilt though, so he went back to work.

The next month went by fairly quickly, as Hedwig was sent back and forth exchanging letters with the female Weasley. Harry had also begun brewing some potions. But homework could only keep his mind off of other things for so long. Sadly, Harry had yet to hear from Blaise, Hermione, Lily, or Tracey. He was beginning to wonder if they no longer cared to be his friends. It was really rather pathetic that the only person writing to him was a mildly obsessed fan-girl. The letters had increased in length from the star-struck eleven year old and Harry was getting bored with each letter after two paragraphs into them.

His frustration merely increased with time. The morning of his birthday, Harry woke up feeling extremely bitter and resentful. He had just set the final touches on a rather tricky concoction, the Draught of Living Death. It was currently brewing on its own as he had to let it settle for twelve hours. Harry had done it properly as it had turned as clear as water in color. The asphodel and wormwood infusion Snape had talked about in Harry's first Potions class were already present. So he just had to make sure nothing else entered the potion for twelve hours or else an explosion would occur, putting

anyone who came in contact with the potion into a deep sleep that they wouldn't awaken from until they had the antidote.

Harry had already started on the antidote as well and had it brewing in the closet to keep the two separate. It would be quite the birthday present if he could put the Dursleys to sleep for the day and go off on his own. That was his plan for tomorrow anyway. He didn't care that the Dursleys weren't going to acknowledge his birthday. Really, he didn't. Ok, that was a lie. But it wasn't like he expected them to make any indication that their nephew was twelve. The only thing they had told him about the day was that the Masons were coming over for dinner and Vernon was going to make a sale so Harry had better stay out of sight and upstairs. That was all too good with Harry. He'd much rather spend his birthday away from the Dursleys anyway.

The problem was Blaise had never sent an invitation. Harry had at least expected some sort of letter from one of his friends. But nothing had shown up. He almost felt as if the whole last year hadn't even happened. He had returned to his own personal hell and that was that. He was back to being ignored by everyone in the Wizarding World. It was enough to drive any sane person mad. Thankfully, Harry was never considered sane by any stretch of the word.

Anyone watching Harry now would see him sitting outside hissing at a garden snake. If that wasn't signs of insanity to the normal person, well... But Harry was intrigued. The snake was hissing back, and Harry understood him.

"Sssso you are a ssspeaker?" the snake had asked.

"I think ssso," Harry responded.

"I have ssseen you many daysss outssside," the snake continued. "You are nice, the large one iss not." Harry snorted. Dudley had long passed large. The last year had allowed Dudley to grow a few inches, although those inches had been sideways. Harry swore that the ground shook whenever Dudley walked.

"Yesss, he iss annoying," Harry agreed.

"Annoying? I do not underssstand."

Harry wondered how to explain the concept of annoying to a snake. Harry began to tap the snake's tail, forcing it to whirl around but never fast enough to catch him.

"Sssstop that," the snake hissed. "It issss not pleasssant."

"That feeling," Harry explained, "isss annoying." The snake bobbed his head in agreement.

"Can I do that to the large one?" Harry laughed outright. "We ssshould. Look, here he comesss."

"I know what day today is," Dudley said in a sing-song voice as he approached Harry. Harry turned around.

"Finally learned the days of the week did you, Dudley? Your Mum must be so proud of her little Diddykins."

"Today's your birthday. But nobody talks to you cause you're a freak! I bet you don't even have any friends at that freak school of yours."

Harry thought of Blaise and Hermione, even Lily's snappy tones, and felt a pang. Dudley's comment had hit closer to home than he would ever know. "Better not let your mum hear you talking about my school," Harry said coolly.

"What are you doing?" he said suspiciously.

"Talking to the snake."

Dudley stared. "B-b-but, you c-c-can't t-t-talk to snakes." Then, Dudley's eyes grew big. "It was you!" he accused. "You set that snake on me last year."

"Better not get me angry then, Dud. Wouldn't want me to send this one after you too."

"I'll tell mum!" Harry began to hiss at the snake. Dudley's eyes were bugging out of his head. "Crawl up hisss leg, but do not bite." The snake quickly latched onto Dudley's leg. The overgrown lump screamed a high-pitched squeal befitting a mud-covered pig and

tried to run as fast as his pudgy legs would carry him. He tripped after four steps and collapsed onto the grass, shaking pitifully.

"Get it off me, Potter!" Harry sighed dramatically.

"Why, Dudley? It seems to have become attached to you. I couldn't bear to separate you."

The snake though had had its fun and had slithered away, leaving Dudley to run into the house and cry to his mum. Harry stared absently at the hedge, and it flashed a brilliant shade of green. Harry jumped and looked at the spot he had been seeing moments before. There was nothing there. But Harry could have sworn something had been looking at him. Harry went back inside but couldn't get rid of the eerie feeling that someone was watching him.

His Aunt took a swing at him with a frying pan the moment he walked in the door and Harry, still looking out for his stalker, never saw it coming. He got nailed upside the head and dropped like a stone just inside the front door.

When Harry finally came to, he had a lump the size of a dragon's egg on the side of his head. He was lying on his bed upstairs and he groaned. It was too bright. He swayed on his feet as he shut the curtain to block the sun and then collapsed back onto the bed. He rolled over and—

"Bloody Hell!" Harry fell off his bed. There was that thing that had been watching him outside. It had seriously frightened Harry badly. He stood up shakily and surveyed the creature.

It had large, bat-like ears that seemed to flop hopelessly from side to side and its green eyes, now bulging because it was staring at Harry, were the size of tennis balls.

In the background, Harry vaguely heard Dudley greeting the Masons at the door.

Harry started when the pitiful thing jumped off his bed and bowed so low that its nose nearly touched the ground.

Harry meant to say hello, but it didn't come out right. "Err— who are you?"

"Dobby, sir. Just Dobby. Dobby the house-elf. So long has Dobby wanted to meet you sir, Dobby has dreamed of this day for many years."

"Err— thanks I suppose. I take it you and Ginny are forming a Harry Potter fan club then?" Harry muttered to himself.

"Harry Potter!" Dobby said in a high-pitched voice. Harry was mildly curious whether or not Dobby's voice would travel downstairs. He imagined the look on his Uncle's face. He could almost picture him storming up here, meeting the end of Harry's wand, and then wondering what to do as his face turned purpler by the second.

"Dobby, is there a reason you're in my room?"

"Dobby has come with a warning sir, but it is difficult... Dobby doesn't know where to begin, sir..."

"I've found that the beginning of the story often is the best place to start," Harry offered. "Why don't you take a seat and tell me what I've got to be careful about." Harry gestured to back to the bed.

Instead of sitting though, Dobby burst into tears; loud, noisy, and very wet tears.

"S-sit down!" he wailed. "Never... never ever..." Harry was sure he heard his Uncle's voice falter. He suppressed a snort. It wouldn't do to laugh at the elf. So Harry found himself trying to comfort Dobby.

"That's quite alright Dobby, if you'd prefer to stand. Just make yourself comfortable."

"Dobby has never been asked by a wizard to sit down, as if Dobby were an equal—" The elf broke off as it choked back a sob.

"I can understand that," Harry nodded solemnly. "There are people who believe that they are better than others, like Malfoy for example."

Dobby froze at the name Malfoy. There was an extremely pregnant silence. "The— the Malfoys, sir? Harry Potter knows the Malfoys?"

"Do you know the Malfoys?"

"I—"

Harry watched as a memory played in his head of the house-elf grabbing Harry and Apparating from Malfoy Manor. The scene progressed as they reappeared at a cottage and suddenly, the elf was lying in Harry's arms. Dobby was bleeding badly from a knife wound. He spoke Harry's name one last time, shuddered, and turned cold.

"That's right." Harry snapped his fingers. "That's the family you serve."

"Harry Potter knows about poor Dobby? Dobby knew Harry Potter was brave, but of his intelligence Dobby never knew."

"I'm really not that brilliant, Hermione—" but Harry broke off. He was rather angry with her for never writing him, and he didn't want to bring up a sore subject.

"Harry Potter is modest too, and humble." Dobby spoke in a reverent tone, making Harry feel rather hot in the face. "Harry Potter is great as well, why, he saved all of us from He-Who-Must Not-Be-Named," Dobby whispered fiercely.

"Voldemort?" Harry asked.

"Ah!" Dobby shrieked. "Speak not the name, sir. The memories are still too fresh for poor Dobby."

"Err— sorry," Harry said rather lamely.

"You know, for someone who is glad that Vo— err You-Know-Who is gone, it's really strange that you'd work for the Malfoys. Do you— like serving them?" Harry asked curiously, even though he already knew the answer.

Dobby looked conflicted. He was torn between nodding and shaking his head. The effect was quite comical as his head moved like a bobble-head. Dobby cried out suddenly and threw himself against the wall. Hedwig, who had been quiet up until that point, hooted angrily. Harry had to bodily tackle Dobby to prevent him from

causing further harm. He sent a reassuring look to Hedwig who merely ruffled her feathers in annoyance.

"Don't punish yourself, Dobby. I understand. I really don't like being here either but I have to also. If I can ever free you, maybe you can work for me someday."

"Work—for Harry Potter?" Dobby asked.

"If you wanted to," Harry said quickly.

"Dobby would love to work for such a great and honorable wizard like Harry Potter, sir. Sir is too good to Dobby. His goodness and greatness is why Harry Potter must be warned," Dobby began urgently.

"Dobby has heard that Harry Potter encountered the Dark Lord again, weeks ago, and again Harry Potter survived."

"Err—yeah, that's right." How the bloody hell did the Malfoys find out about that one?

"Harry Potter is our only hope. For that reason, Harry Potter must not go back to Hogwarts."

Harry stared at the elf.

"Are you mad? Why shouldn't I go back to Hogwarts?"

"There is a plot, sir—do not ask the details for Dobby cannot say—and terrible things will happen at Hogwarts. If Harry Potter returns, he will be in mortal danger. Harry Potter is too important to lose. He must remain where it is safe."

"You can't tell me anymore can you? I'm guessing this is Malfoy Sr.'s idea. Does it have anything to do with Vol—You-Know-Who?"

Harry looked at the elf, whose eyes were bulging out of its sockets.

"Not— not He—Who—Must—Not—Be—Named— no sir."

"What about this Riddle fellow?" Harry asked suddenly, remembering the words of the Sorting Hat. If Harry was right, and he

had a feeling he was, Voldemort and Riddle were one and the same. And if he was right about that, then that meant Harry did in fact have a part of Voldemort nee Riddle's soul inside him.

Dobby's eyes were as wide as saucers. He actually fell off the bed. He nodded rapidly, so fast that Harry thought his neck would snap.

"That's why Harry Potter must not go back to Hogwarts."

"I'm afraid I can't make that promise, Dobby. Hogwarts is my home, more so than this place will ever be."

"But here tis safe, sir. Harry Potter leaves Dobby no choice." Harry stared as the elf fled down the stairs. Harry followed after him and heard Uncle Vernon getting to the punch line of some sort of Japanese golfer joke. It really was more disgusting than funny, an appropriate description that could be applied to the Dursleys as a whole. Harry watched as Dobby approached the pudding Aunt Petunia had labored furiously over for several days.

"If you're planning on trying to get my relatives to force me to stay that won't work, Dobby," Harry said quietly. The house elf looked up in wonder. "They don't have any control over what I do in this house. So that won't make me stay here." Dobby stared at Harry, and then the elf's eyes glazed over. He dashed back upstairs and Harry followed feeling very nervous.

He had a very good reason to be it seemed. His potion, which only needed one more hour to finish simmering, lay by the wall in his room. Harry watched in horror as Dobby had picked up the vial of hellebore syrup and was holding it over the cauldron. Harry could only stare at the house elf, trying to figure out what he was going to do.

"Harry Potter must say he will not go back to school, or Dobby will drop this in the potion."

"No..." croaked Harry. "You don't know what that will do. You can't drop that in there Dobby."

"Harry Potter must say he's not going back to school, or Dobby will."

"Dobby, if you pour that in there I won't try to free you from the Malfoys."

Dobby hesitated, but that was enough. "Expelliarmus!" Harry growled. Startled, the vial flew out of Dobby's hand, but it had been tipped precariously low as it was. Harry could only look on in morbid fascination as he saw a few of the drops in the vial fall towards the potion. Everything seemed to happen slowly. Harry watched as the drops fell in the air, slowly heading towards the cauldron. Asphodel and hellebore reacted badly in the best of circumstances, but coupled with the properties of the nearly finished Draught of Living Death... Harry could only hope the resulting explosion wouldn't cover him in the potion so he could get to the antidote in his closet. Harry winced as the vial landed in his hand and the few drops that had escaped connected with the surface of the potion.

Chapter Eight: Clear as Mud

Harry stared at the potion. Nothing seemed to be happening. He rushed towards Dobby, who disappeared with a pop. An owl then flew in through his window, throwing a letter at his head with an official seal from the Ministry of Magic. He made motions to opening it when the cauldron exploded.

He was covered in the potion and Harry swayed on his feet, before slamming painfully into his closet door.

Bright light filtered into Harry's vision. He sat up shakily and looked around.

"Well I'm definitely not at the Dursleys anymore," Harry muttered.

His landscape seemed somewhat familiar, although barren. As Harry looked around, he noticed the dome of memories that he had fought for previously.

"So I'm in my head," he mused.

"That's right." Harry's Dad said, materialized right in front of him. The body was very transparent and Harry had to strain to see the outline of the body. Harry quickly realized his mistake though. The person he had thought was his Dad was actually an older version of himself. And wearing Gryffindor robes.

"This is interesting," Harry said softly.

"You have no idea," muttered future-Harry.

"Ok so what is going on? I'm about to get sorted and then all these memories fly into my brain, I feel like my very essence is being attacked, and then throughout the year I know spells and facts that I have no business hearing of in passing, let alone knowing."

"I'm not entirely sure what's going on, but I can give you some information. Most of my core is locked in that dome over there," future-Harry said, motioning with a hand towards the dome. "Voldemort is in here also, and he's been keeping me holed up in there. Something happened that sent the two of us back into your body, and a piece of Voldemort's soul was already in your body, so

the two Voldemorts were able to share their power and become stronger. That was how I became trapped in the dome. You weakened him though in that battle you had. He accidentally hit his other self with a killing curse. So now only Voldemort's essence from the future is in here, as well as my own. Still with me?"

"Uh..." Harry said hesitantly. "I think so. Let's see. Ok, so you and Voldemort got your souls sent from the future. You're both in my body. Voldemort already had a piece of his soul in my body before that though?"

"Yes. You were what is called a Horcrux. Do you know the word?"

"I think so. I remember thinking of it before." Harry racked his mind, trying to find his memory of the word. Different visions flew by the two Harrys in rapid succession. It slowed to a halt and then stopped completely. There had been a pull from the dome and Voldemort had felt it and stopped the summoning.

"No, I can't seem to remember after all," Harry said.

"Not to worry, in good time. I don't remember the specifics, but it has something to do with tearing off part of your soul and placing it somewhere else. A part of Voldemort's soul was placed inside of you."

"Ok, but the future-Voldemort killed that part of his soul when he attacked me and I ducked the killing curse."

"Right."

"And your— or I guess it'd be our—memories of the future are locked away in that dome," Harry said.

"Yes."

"But the memories leak through and that's how I know some things, but not others," Harry said, feeling proud he could handle this concept.

"And that's also why I am able to inhabit a sort of corporal form at the moment."

"Ok, so what do we do?"

"Ideally, we kill the Voldemort in here and free up the future memories to take him down. But he's stronger than I am," future-Harry ended quietly.

"What if we both fought him?"

"I'm not sure," future-Harry said slowly. "If he killed me, then you could quite possibly lose all of the future memories I possess. And if he killed you, then there would be a struggle for who would control the body I'd imagine. Or else your mind would just snap and you would be catatonic."

"That doesn't sound like very good odds."

"Not really, but when do we ever have something in our favor?" future-Harry asked with the hint of a grin.

Harry returned the cheeky smile and nodded.

"Is there a way we could sort of, you know, merge together?"

Future-Harry paused and looked extremely thoughtful. "There might be."

"What if we forced Voldemort to merge as well? We outnumber him, and we would gain his memories."

Future-Harry stared at his younger counterpart incredulously. "You want to merge souls with Voldemort?" he repeated.

"Well I don't see what the big deal is. I'll still be in full control, plus I'll gain all of his memories as well as yours. It's the perfect plan."

Future-Harry looked at Harry as if he was only seeing him for the first time.

"I don't know if it's possible to merge, but I'll see if I can figure anything out."

"How long am I going to be here for?" Harry asked.

"What do you mean how long are you going to be here? How did you get here?"

Harry related the story of the potions incident to his counterpart. "Hmmm," future-Harry pondered. "I thought you were practicing Occlumency. If this is from a botched potion..." he trailed off darkly.

"I'm going to have to wait until someone gives me the antidote."

Future-Harry nodded grimly. "You'll have to wait alone though. I suggest you start practicing Occlumency. I don't have enough energy to stay here much longer."

"How do I do Occlumency? And what is it?"

"Well you already seem to be a natural at both Occlumency, which is protecting your mind from foreign invasion—" Harry snorted.

"What?"

"Well you say I'm a natural yet I have two people in my mind that are 'foreign.'"

Future-Harry smirked. "You technically have their souls as well though, so that doesn't count. As I was saying, you're also proficient at Legilimency, the art of invading someone's mind and perusing their thoughts. I believe it's a left over trait from Voldemort. I was rubbish at the mental arts."

"So for Occlumency what should I do?"

"I dunno. I would imagine it's supposed to sort of protect your memories, maybe by building a barrier or something similar to where all my memories are. So maybe try to organize your mind and make traps and barriers and things of that nature. I really have no clue."

"Well I'll give that a try."

"So, Slytherin, huh?" Future-Harry asked. The Gryffindor emblem on his robes seemed accentuated somehow.

"Apparently. How do you feel about that?"

"Well, I generally don't like Slytherins, but I can't really say it's because they are all in the house. Just never met one I liked is all. Just, be careful. I don't trust them. They don't trust them."

"You'd better go. Save your energy for when we need it."

Future-Harry nodded and vanished.

"Hmmm," Harry muttered to no one in particular. His mental projection of himself sat down cross legged, eyes shut tight, and tried to figure out a good barrier to protect his mind. He figured he would want something sneaky since he was a Slytherin. His mind should be a representation of himself after all. He tried to separate his mind into two basic categories: Hogwarts, and not-Hogwarts. A long time seemed to pass, but time seemed meaningless in Harry's drugged mind. What seemed like two minutes could have been two hours, or two days, or even two weeks.

Harry, still oblivious, didn't notice the snakes appearing around him until one landed on him. Even then, he was only dimly aware of its presence and continued to concentrate. Slowly but surely, a pop signaled the arrival of a trio of doors. The first was powerful, and Harry felt drawn towards it. He floated through the door, still seated, and was brought to the grounds of Hogwarts. Harry opened his eyes and blinked. He watched as millions of snakes began aiding each other to help build the foundation of Hogwarts.

The castle gave off an aura that stated quite clearly it was not to be trifled with. Its battlements stood proudly overlooking the grounds. The doors that led to the Great Hall were majestic and grand. Harry watched as the Hogwarts he knew came to life before his very eyes. Here he saw the future memories that he had been able to retain all floating around. Each memory was a different Harry walking around the school. Harry approached one of his counterparts near the Potions classroom and the scene he represented replayed in front of him.

Harry watched as a large man directed his Potions class to make the Draught of Living Death. Harry saw himself working feverishly over his own cauldron, glancing at Malfoy every so often. After awhile the memory slowly drew to a close and the memory Harry grinned in triumph as his potion seemed to win. He was awarded

with a vial containing a potion which Harry suddenly knew was Felix Felicis, liquid luck.

Harry shook himself out of his stupor and the counterpart continued walking as if nothing had happened. Harry traveled through the school and came across the third-floor corridor. He looked expectantly for the memory of his adventure through the trapdoor but not a single Harry was in sight. He walked back out of the school and was drawn towards the Forbidden Forest. Here he found the dome that represented his future memories. He saw a Harry escape from the dome and run towards the castle and its protection. Voldemort fired a curse at the Harry that was trying to escape. It was deflected and the Harry managed to run.

Harry watched this exchange curiously. Apparently each memory was able to protect itself to some extent. Harry thought about the merits behind dueling this Voldemort right now, but decided against it. It would be better to wait until he knew what he was doing. So he withdrew from the forest and headed back to the gates. Once he left the wards of Hogwarts he was transported back to the room with the three doors.

He looked at the remaining two doors now. One seemed awfully depressing and almost sad. The door was old and rusted. It appeared to have been through many damaging events and was having a hard time standing. Harry hesitantly approached this door and pushed it open.

He immediately found himself back in the confines of Number Four Privet Drive. Here were many miserable memories from Harry's life. Also his memories as a Slytherin were located here for some strange reason. Harry realized this must be the memories of the real Harry Potter. Harry looked around and saw that the most cherished memories were inside his cupboard. Harry instinctively knew this because his cupboard was his safest place on earth. No one could get to him there.

Harry already knew everything here so he chose to leave and was back to the room with three doors. He approached the last door hesitantly. It was shrouded in a dark mist, and as he walked towards it whispers seemed to start coming from the darkness. His body passed through a fluttering curtain that served as the door and blackness overtook him.

He floated through what seemed a void and slowly but surely he found himself coming in contact with Voldemort. He was stranded somewhere in a forest of sorts. Harry didn't like what was through here at all. He ran back as fast as he could to the comfort of the void. He came back to the floating curtain and managed to slip back through. He flipped because his center of gravity seemed to shift and then he fell to the floor of the room with the three doors.

Suddenly, Harry was able to open his eyes and he did so. He found himself swallowing the antidote to the Draught of Living Death. That was mildly surprising, but the most surprising part was that he was being force fed it by none other than—

"Daphne Greengrass?" Harry blurted out incredulously, accidentally spitting some of the antidote on her. Nonplussed, she brushed it off and stared at him.

"Know any other dark-haired girls who don't hate you?" she asked in a slightly teasing way, which threw Harry for a loop.

"Err— not off the top of my head."

"Finish this," she commanded.

Harry felt compelled to do as she said and drank the rest of the antidote.

"How did you get here—how did you even know I was here—why are you here?" Harry asked quickly.

"Well I knew you were here because of my father. Through his connections at the ministry he heard you were sent a notice for underage magic: a disarming charm. That made him rather concerned. If you remember, I said people would be watching you last year, Potter. That hasn't changed. My father was concerned that you had used an offensive spell but he was too busy to do anything about it. When he came home and told me and Astoria, my younger sister, we were curious."

"Okay that's the why, but how did you know I was in Surrey? And how did you even get here?"

"We sent an owl with a tracking charm on it and traced you to this house. As for how we got here—"

"We?"

"We," Astoria Greengrass said firmly. Harry turned and framed in the doorway was someone who could only be Daphne's younger sister. Her flowing black hair framed her small, round face and her nose seemed to be slightly aristocratic, as it was unconsciously held in the air a bit higher than normal. She was fairly short, shorter than Harry anyway, and Harry had never seen her before in his life.

"She starts Hogwarts this year," Daphne said, answering Harry's silent question before he realized he was going to ask it.

"Right— errr— it's nice to meet you," Harry said diplomatically, offering his hand to the younger girl who took it but dropped it very quickly.

"Well, thank you for coming; I'd probably still be unconscious if you weren't here. How did you say you got here again?"

"We didn't. But we took the Knight Bus..." Astoria trailed off.

"The Night Bus?" Harry asked. "It's still daytime."

"Not 'Night,' 'Knight.' Have you never heard of the Knight Bus?" Harry shook his head in the negative. That was a memory that had yet to escape.

"Well it's a bus that takes you wherever you want to go. Why it's named the Knight Bus I have no idea. So do you want to tell me what happened and how long you were out?"

Harry related the story of his birthday and Daphne and Astoria listened impassively. They seemed skeptical when Harry mentioned Dobby but nodded along and Astoria's hand flew to her mouth when Harry reached the part about using magic. A look from Daphne brought her hand back to her side. "That was at the end of July," Harry concluded.

"So you've been out for almost two weeks. Today's Tuesday. Here's your Hogwarts letter by the way," Daphne said, handing him a letter from the school.

"We were going to Diagon Alley today but we'll wait until tomorrow if you want to come," Astoria said politely. Harry smiled and nodded.

"That would be nice. Thank you," Harry said, really meaning it.

"Why didn't your family ever come in and check on you, Potter?" Daphne asked, reverting to her infamous cool and detached demeanor.

Harry couldn't help himself; he snorted. The Greengrass sisters stared at him curiously.

"I wouldn't exactly call them family," Harry said by way of explanation. "We don't get along very well." That was an understatement, Harry thought.

Daphne knew not to press the matter and the subject dropped.

"How did you convince my relatives to let you into my room?" Harry asked suddenly, curious about how that particular conversation went.

Astoria had the good grace to blush.

"Don't ask how, but we may have slipped some Dreamless Sleep Potion into their drinks at dinner..."

Daphne looked on the verge of reprimanding her sister for saying but chose against it when she saw Harry's amused smirk.

"I presume they've fallen asleep at the dinner table then, Miss Greengrass?"

"You would presume correctly, Mr. Potter," returned Astoria with a matching smirk.

"Now that you've rescued me," Harry began dryly, "in true Slytherin fashion, I might add, what happens now?"

"Good question, although I shudder to think how a Gryffindor would have rescued you. Probably try to drag you out the window, only to realize there are bars there— there are bars there?" Daphne asked, only just realizing the fact.

"There are bars there?" Harry asked, as he moved towards his window to closer examine it.

"Funny, those weren't here before..." Harry trailed off. "I'll have to ask them that the next time they wake up. So what's your master plan?"

"Well I didn't expect to be force-feeding you antidote to Draught of Living Death and then having to rescue you, but I suppose we can get you to Zabini's house and leave you there. I know he invited you but you never responded. I imagine you were too... indisposed to reply," she finished with the barest hint of a smile.

Harry could count on one hand the number of times he'd seen or heard of Daphne Greengrass allowing any emotion to cross her face. She was the female version of Snape only anger did not surface either. However, in the span of an hour, he had seen her show more emotions than he knew her to be capable of showing. Her calm demeanor seemed to be off-balance by the combination of Harry, her sister, and being outside of Hogwarts. It was amusing.

"Then over the river and through the woods to the Zabini house, we go," sang Harry.

"How did you know how to get there?" asked Daphne curiously. "That is one of the most jealously guarded secrets of the Zabini family. Helen Zabini, who is on her eighth husband, is extremely wealthy from the mysterious deaths of her seven previous husbands. The Zabini manor has been protected by so many wards and enchantments it's almost impossible to find. Blaise told me how to get there a couple weeks earlier and he said to cross the Tyne River where a gap occurs and continue North passed Hadrian's Wall and through the forest is the manor." Harry tried valiantly to keep his jaw from falling to the floor and managed to only open it slightly, but was able to play it off as taking a large breath of air.

Harry's laughter broke the silence that had fallen when he looked at Astoria. She was wearing a cloak, but not just any cloak, a hooded-cloak; a red, hooded cloak. She looked at him curiously. Harry gasped for air.

"Sorry, Muggle thing." The Greengrass sisters shared a look, plainly saying Harry was crazy.

"Is there a quick way to get there?"

"Floo," Daphne said, as if that explained it all. It did. Harry was assaulted with memories of traveling through magical fireplaces. Sadly, in every memory Harry saw himself coming out of the fireplace very ungracefully. He winced, and it did not go unnoticed.

"Not very fond of the Floo, Potter?"

"I prefer a broomstick," he muttered.

Harry swiftly packed his things and sent Hedwig on ahead to inform Blaise they were on the way. Harry tapped his wand to the trunk and it shrank, the built in spell recognizing his actions, and he pocketed it.

The trio left Number Four Privet Drive, being careful to step on each sleeping Dursley on the way. Harry repressed a snort as he saw Dudley, sprawled on the floor, with his face in his plate. It was a pleasant sight to depart with.

The Knight Bus brought them to the Leaky Cauldron and they floored straight to Hadrian's Wall, skipping over the Tyne. From there they walked in silence for about five minutes before the gates of Zabini Manor appeared in front of them.

A loud gong echoed in the air around them and it became heavy. It was difficult for them to move and faster than you could say "Quidditch" they were trapped.

A tall dark man approached them from inside the gates. His wand was held out in front of him and his eyes darted back and forth suspiciously.

"Who are you?"

"Da—"

"Ah, wait," Mr. Zabini interrupted, lowering his wand. "Would that be Miss Greengrass? Terribly sorry, my dear. Defense system you see.

We weren't expecting you. And that would be young Astoria. I haven't seen you in ages, child. And— Potter?"

Mr. Zabini's wand came back up and he aimed it at Harry's forehead. He crossed through the gates and with a wave of his wand Daphne and Astoria were released from their bonds.

"What are you doing here, Potter?" Mr. Zabini asked in a dangerously low voice. "We don't pick sides. You aren't welcome here."

"Dad!" a voice called, running across the grounds. Harry made out Blaise running towards his father with a letter in his hand, presumably from Harry.

"What is it, Blaise?" Mr. Zabini asked, refusing to lower his wand.

"Please, Harry and I are friends. I invited him here. Surely you've spoken with Mother about this."

"You know very well your mother and I don't talk very often..." Mr. Zabini began, trailing off.

As one, everyone's heads turned towards Helen Zabini. Harry thought she was one of the most beautiful witches he had ever laid his eyes upon. There was no denying the grace with which she walked, she seemed to have descended from the heavens and her feet seemed to float, as if they were itching to return. Mr. Zabini gave a very noticeable gulp and turned around slowly to face his wife.

"Now Menelaus, that is no way to treat our guests," she scolded. "You would do well to set the poor boy free."

Harry never saw someone raise their wand and cast a spell so fast in their life. He was suddenly freed and watched as Mr. Zabini walked briskly away from them and allowed them entry to his home. Harry found himself following Blaise, along with his two rescuers, into the living room.

"Wow," Harry said breathlessly. The living room was as big as the Dursleys whole first floor, if not bigger. It was decorated with an ornate chandelier at the entrance of the double doors they had just

passed through, with long winding columns on either side. A beautiful carpet led them down the walkway with rooms on either side. They passed a kitchen that left Harry's mouth hanging open, a ball room that Harry did not want to ever have to dance in, a room to floo places, and a winding staircase that led to an equally breathtaking second floor... and third... and fourth...

"Welcome to Zabini manor," Blaise said with a wave of his hand. Daphne and Astoria were much more composed than Harry, although that might have been because they were used to mansions. Harry was only used to Number Four and Hogwarts.

"You've already met my parents obviously," Blaise said with a wry sort of grin as he led them up the stairs towards his room, which was on the second floor.

"Harry, you'll be staying with us for the rest of the summer, right?"

Harry looked up from the steps at Blaise's words.

"If that's okay that would be brilliant," Harry said enthusiastically.

"That's settled then. I already had permission from Mum."

"Have you already gone to Diagon?" Astoria asked.

"Not yet, we were planning on waiting for Harry. Now that he's here, I imagine we'll leave tomorrow." Blaise opened the door to his room and waved them in.

"That's when we're going too," Astoria piped up cheerfully. "I'm getting my real wand tomorrow. I can't wait!" she said with a large smile. Daphne stared at her younger sister.

"I don't think she's going to be sorted into Slytherin," Daphne whispered in a loud voice that could be heard plainly by the room's occupants. Astoria glared.

"Just because she shows emotion doesn't mean she won't be in Slytherin, Daphne," Harry said with a sly grin. Astoria beamed at Harry.

Daphne stared at Harry and he felt nervous. Then, all of a sudden, she laughed. She even broke into one of the first true smiles Harry had ever seen on her face, a smile without malicious intent.

"I suppose you're right, Harry. You wear your emotions on your sleeve and you're in Slytherin. I just learned to be unrevealing the hard way. I am the oldest after all. My father tends to force me to keep my emotions in check more so than my sister. That's why I'm so proficient at Occlumency."

"You know Occlumency?" Harry asked quickly.

"Of course. That's why I am always in control of my emotions," Daphne explained.

"And here I thought it was because you didn't have any..." Harry said but his smile betrayed him.

"So what do you know about Occlumency?"

Daphne adopted a superior tone. "Occlumency is the art of defending the mind from exterior assault. It takes a disciplined mind to be able to effectively occlude itself and one who is skilled in the art can provide false memories to the attacker, or even counterattack the person invading their mind. There are two ways to learn Occlumency. The faster way is to clear your mind and rid yourself of emotion. When someone attacks your mind it will appear blank. This is the quicker way to learn but lets the attacker know that you are an Occlumens, which may or may not be desired. In the long run, the more effective way to learn is to organize your mind and eventually lay various traps for attackers to fall into. You can also create barriers of sorts in your mind to protect itself, and this is where false memories can be projected. This takes longer because you must organize your mind first, but gives the Occlumens a superior memory recall as well as the ability to trick attackers."

"How do you organize your mind?" Harry asked, curious if he had done it the right way.

"Well each person is different aren't they?" she asked smugly. "But generally speaking, first you want to divide your memories into broad categories, like for example school and everything not related to school. Or in your case magic related and non-magic related. This

is the easy part. Then you would further subdivide these categories say for school into different classes, and for non-school say your friends are one category and each friend would have their own category. Another category could be parents. And the broader category for that would be people. Another could be places. And so on. It just depends on what memories you have. Of course it's constantly updating because you're gaining new memories. The best thing to do is to sort the new set of memories before you go to sleep each night. It's a good habit to have and it keeps your mind updated in a sense."

"Well I sort of started Occlumency then. I did the first part," Harry said with a touch of pride.

"It's a good technique to master. You should keep at it. That's about how far Astoria is I think, right?" Daphne looked to her sister for confirmation. At Astoria's nod, she continued.

"What about you, Blaise?" Harry asked.

"There isn't much in his head that's worth protecting or organizing," Daphne commented idly.

Blaise glared. "I was never interested in the mental arts. They're for people who are, well, mental if you ask me." Harry snorted. So did Astoria. Daphne chuckled a book at Blaise who swiftly stopped it with a spell.

Harry waited for an owl to appear, but it didn't happen.

"How did the Ministry not detect it?" Harry asked. "Do you have wards preventing them from seeing the spells cast?"

"Nah," Blaise said. "People think that the purebloods get away with spellcasting because of ancient wards but that's not it at all. The Ministry checks when spells are cast and if witches or wizards who are of age are known to be living in the area where the spell was cast, it's overlooked. So if you have at least one witch or wizard living with you, your magic goes undetected. It's just assumed the witch or wizard cast it and nothing happens. Underage magic is left to be enforced by the parents."

"So only Muggleborns, or people who are stuck living at their Muggle relatives house," Harry added bitterly, "are sent underage magic notices."

"Yeah, that's about right. If it makes you feel better you can cast magic here," Blaise added sympathetically.

"Yeah, I feel loads better already," Harry said sarcastically.

"Hey I'm just saying, no need to go all angst teenager on me."

"Well, I think we're going to leave, Potter," Daphne said.

"Ah, okay then. Err— thanks for everything Daphne. And call me Harry."

"Okay then." She spared Harry a small smile, shook his hand, and walked downstairs towards the fireplace to floo home. Astoria came up to him next and gave him a small hug.

"See you tomorrow," she said brightly and skipped away after her sister.

Blaise showed them out and Harry followed behind, watching as they threw the floo powder, shouted out their home address, and vanished in the green fire.

"Well that was entertaining," Blaise said.

"That's because you missed out on my dramatic rescue."

"Do tell," Blaise said. They walked back up to Blaise's room as Harry retold the whole story of how he was saved from the Dursleys. When he mentioned Dobby, Blaise interrupted.

"That's Malfoy's house-elf."

"I know," Harry replied.

"I wonder why it would try to keep you from going back to Hogwarts," Blaise said curiously.

"Well I imagine we'll figure it out sooner or later," answered Harry.

"Just keep an eye on Malfoy this year, yeah?"

"Good call."

Harry continued his story and had Blaise in stitches by the end of it. He was laughing uproariously. He was making such a loud racket that his mother yelled at him to either shut up or she would cast a silencing charm on him. So Blaise cast his own silencing charm and continued laughing. Once he was finished he cancelled his spell and looked at Harry.

"Well, at least something good came out of all this..." he trailed off suggestively.

"What?" Harry questioned.

"Looks like Astoria has a crush on you."

Harry got a very good look at Zabini manor for the next hour as he chased after Blaise trying to pound him.

Chapter 9: Plans Gone Astoria

The next morning, Harry was rudely awoken by Blaise earlier than he would have liked.

"Diagon Alley," Blaise yelled as explanation when a thoroughly soaked and disgruntled Harry glared at him. If looks could kill, Harry's green eyes would have killed him on the spot. Later, Harry would find out that looks could, in fact, kill, but the issue at hand was that Harry was now wide awake, shivering, and feeling murderous. A cheerful Blaise left the room and a quick drying charm later found Harry ready to face the day.

Harry dressed and made his way downstairs to leave. He grabbed his letter along the way that Daphne had given him and read it to himself.

It told him to catch the Hogwarts Express as usual from King's Cross station on September first (as if he would miss that). Then it followed with a list of books he would need for the year.

Second-Year Students will require:

The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 2 by Miranda Goshawk

Break with a Banshee by Gilderoy Lockhart

Gadding with Ghouls by Gilderoy Lockhart

Holidays with Hags by Gilderoy Lockhart

Travels with Trolls by Gilderoy Lockhart

Voyages with Vampires by Gilderoy Lockhart

Wanderings with Werewolves by Gilderoy Lockhart

Year with the Yeti by Gilderoy Lockhart

"What's up with all the Lockhart books?" Blaise wondered aloud. Mrs. Zabini, who overheard him, snatched the list from Blaise's hands.

"Gilderoy Lockhart? I've heard some bad things about him. His autobiography coming out, *Magical Me*, is utterly ridiculous. A more fitting title would be: *A Baboon with a Bamboo Branch*, since he is so fond of alliteration. If he has honestly done a quarter of what he claims I will be impressed."

"So he's a fraud?" asked Blaise.

"So I've heard," his Mum replied. "But he is either a very talented fiction writer or... something else. If these are all your defense books, I'm not entirely sure if I want you taking that class. Obviously I don't have a choice if you're to remain at Hogwarts, but if you're learning from Lockhart's books, you aren't likely to learn very much that's useful. At least you won't have Lockhart as the professor."

"How are you so sure?" Harry asked slowly.

"Well any competent professor would be intelligent enough to not assign their own books as the course reading. Anything you wrote you can teach, first of all, and secondly, it prevents any type of constructive thinking because if you reach a different conclusion than the author, instead of provoking a thoughtful response, you would be contradicting the professor, which prevents any real learning from taking place. Professors don't take kindly to being contradicted."

"Well, you did say competent. And if you're right about Lockhart, calling him competent would be a bit of a stretch wouldn't it?" Harry asked.

Mrs. Zabini stared at Harry. Her face slowly changed from confident to thoughtful to horrified in a matter of moments. It was quite comical and Harry had to turn away lest he break into laughter.

"We'd better hope for the best then, Harry," Blaise began haltingly. "If we're not careful, we'll end up with a class we will be hard-pressed to fail."

"Blaise Orestes Zabini! I don't care who your teacher is you will still ensure that you are ahead of all the other houses. I'm still disappointed that a Muggleborn beat you in every class."

"Hey, in my defense, that witch is good," Blaise said.

"Do I look like I care, Blaise? You had better mind your grades and your tongue if you don't want to suffer the consequences." Blaise gulped nervously and nodded fervently. "That's better," his mother said. "Now, shall we go to Diagon Alley?"

Traveling by floo to Diagon Alley was fairly uneventful. Harry and Blaise, along with Mrs. Zabini, arrived at the Leaky Cauldron. They were still early to meet up with the Greengrass sisters, so Harry and Blaise went to Gringotts. Blaise went with his mother to their vault, leaving Harry by himself.

So that was how Harry found himself approaching one of the goblin tellers alone, and slightly hesitant about how to approach him. He had not spoken to the goblins after encountering the souls of his future self and Voldemort. He looked at his memories quickly to see if there was any indication on how to deal with goblins.

Memories of one goblin in particular assaulted him: Griphook. Much like the rest of his race, he was exceedingly proud, haughty, bloodthirsty, held wizards to be untrustworthy in matters involving promises, treasure, and gold, and generally felt that the Wizarding community was beneath him. Wand-carriers weren't to be trusted in his eyes, and he truly had a different breeding than Harry did. In that burst of clarity, Harry realized it was impossible to fully understand goblin notions of life unless you were a goblin.

"Harry Potter!" cried an old goblin, evidently startled by his presence. "How— how may I help you today?"

"I wish to enter my vault," Harry stated, with a slight feeling of déjà vu, although he didn't know why.

The old goblin seemed to recoil a little. Harry glanced around curiously. Many of the witches and wizards waiting in line were staring at Harry with undisguised interest. The goblins seemed to have paused in their work and were staring unabashedly at Harry as well.

"I'm afraid, Mr. Potter, that only the Head of a family, or anyone accompanying him, may enter the vault. As neither can be applied, you will not be able to gain access to the Potter vault."

"I was let into it last year," Harry said somewhat hotly, but gave pause when the statement hit him. A glance at the nameplate said the goblin's name was Bogrod, and he looked ready to kill; Harry had just called into question a Gringotts law. Bogrod was highly offended at the mere insinuation that something had not been followed by protocol.

"You are sorely mistaken, Mr. Potter," Bogrod said coldly, a tone of voice Harry had little trouble reconciling with the image of the older goblin. Harry realized he had to fix this quickly.

"Ah, my humblest apologies Bogrod, I believe we misunderstood each other. I meant to request access to the trust vault. But while we are on the subject, what is required for me to become the Head of the Potter family? I am the last living member; is there an age requirement?"

"There isn't an age requirement, per se," began the goblin. "Your magic must have reached a level of maturity however, for the signet ring to recognize you. You are welcome to try it on but it is highly unlikely it will recognize you as its true owner."

"What does the ring do to those that it refuses to recognize?" Harry inquired.

"If the ring is willing to claim allegiance to you but can't yet: nothing. If you are not worthy to wear the ring however..." The goblin trailed off with a bloodthirsty expression that would have looked absolutely feral had he been smiling.

"Well there's no harm in trying the ring on then. How will I know if it recognizes me as head of the Potter family?"

"You will know, young Mr. Potter, of that I am certain. Rugnak!" called Bogrod.

A young looking goblin appeared quite hurriedly from around the corner and approached the teller's desk respectfully. "How may I help, Elder Bogrod?" he asked with a toothy grin.

"Fetch the Potter family signet ring from the inheritance office," Bogrod commanded. The goblin bowed and disappeared in the blink of an eye.

"The inheritance office?" Harry questioned.

"All families whose Heads die before the Headship is passed on turn over the signet ring to Gringotts until someone appears to claim it."

"So how would the Potter ring have been turned over? Did someone bring it to you?"

"The rings have a charm on them that, when the wearer dies, if the ring has been ordered to someone else, through will or blood, then it appears on the correct person's finger. If the Head is killed in a formal duel, the ring is one object that can be claimed through the spoils of the victor if there is no heir apparent, claimed through blood or will, and if that is the case, then the ring will remain until the object chosen by the victor is announced. If the ring is not chosen, then similar to all other cases, the ring simply appears here at Gringotts."

"I think that made sense," Harry mumbled.

"Ah, here comes Rugnak. May I have the ring please Rugnak?"

"Here it is," Rugnak said importantly, and handed the ring to the Elder goblin. He quickly inspected it and then handed it to Harry.

"On the ring finger of your right hand if you please, Mr. Potter."

Harry complied and slipped the ring onto his right ring finger. Many things happened at once. A blinding light appeared in the room, while the ring burned itself into Harry's flesh. It began to mold to fit Harry's finger, then shot off, nailing Bogrod in the forehead. Harry glanced at Bogrod's forehead from his own vantage point off the ground, amused to note a scar shaped like a lightning bolt appear there before it was healed with a wave of the goblins hand.

"That was... unexpected," Bogrod said, breaking the silence that had descended upon the lobby.

Harry picked himself up with as much dignity as possible and ran a hand through his messy hair.

"I have a feeling that wasn't exactly the desired response."

"Quite," Bogrod agreed.

"It appears as though I will have to wait before I try to obtain the Headship then."

"I would recommend after you turn fifteen, Mr. Potter. Your magic should be stable enough to be recognized by that point."

"Thank you, Bogrod."

"Naturally. Now, let me have someone show you to your trust vault. I believe you needed to visit it correct?"

"If it's not too much trouble," Harry said with a small smile. Bogrod clapped his hands and Rugnak reappeared.

"Please take Mr. Potter to his vault. You do have your key correct? Good." He sent Harry off and all the goblins looked after him. Whispers took his place once he exited the lobby and Harry was left to ponder the mysterious happenings of the ring as he rode on the cart to his vault. He absently withdrew more than he needed in galleons and returned to meet Blaise while deep in thought.

"Alright there, Harry?" Blaise asked as they walked back towards the Leaky Cauldron to meet up with Daphne and Astoria. Mrs. Zabini walked briskly in front of them.

"Yeah," he said quietly. "I'm fine."

When the three of them returned to the Leaky Cauldron from Gringotts, Daphne and Astoria were seated at a table with a woman who was presumably Mrs. Greengrass. The two elder women began to chat over drinks and sent the quartet off to get their supplies.

"So where does everyone need to go?" Blaise asked cheerfully as the four of them entered Diagon Alley proper.

"Astoria needs all the basics," Daphne began, "such as her wand, robes, cauldron, and so on. Why don't you boys get the books while we get those things, then we'll meet you at Flourish and Blotts."

"Good plan," Harry said approvingly. Astoria skipped ahead to Ollivanders with Daphne huffing in exasperation before following on her heels.

"Up for some exploring there, Mr. Potter?" Blaise asked mischievously.

"Where did you have in mind, Mr. Zabini?"

"I was thinking Knockturn Alley, if you're up for an adventure." In response, Harry headed in that direction. Blaise grinned.

They ran towards Knockturn Alley. They passed by hags and wizards in dark cloaks and covered faces, sketchy looking street vendors, and a few rather shady looking stores. Harry pulled Blaise into one of these stores, Borgin and Burkes, and they snuck in and made their way to the back, away from the register.

The shop was dimly lit and towards the back they saw a stone fireplace that could be used to floo in and out of for customers. A glass case near them held a withered looking hand on a plush looking cushion with a card proclaiming it to be the Hand of Glory. A glass eye nearby seemed to follow their every movement. Some rusty, spiked instruments that Filch probably had dreams about stood in one corner of the room and what looked like they were probably human bones littered the floor near the counter.

"This really isn't all that interesting, Harry," Blaise commented while he was entranced by an opal necklace. He reached a hand out to touch it before Harry stopped him.

"Malfoy," Harry hissed. Sure enough, Draco Malfoy and his father had just entered the shop. Harry dragged Blaise towards a cabinet which the two of them jumped into just in time. They closed it shut, leaving it open just enough to see what was going on.

Mr. Malfoy entered the shop, his cold, gray eyes lazily taking in everything without seeming to care.

"Touch nothing, Draco."

Blaise chuckled as Malfoy's posture froze; his hand had been halfway towards grabbing a glass eye.

"I thought you were going to buy me a present," Malfoy whined. Now it was Harry's turn to chuckle.

"Had you been paying more attention, you would have remembered I said I would buy you a racing broom," scolded his father as he drummed his fingers impatiently on the counter.

"What good will that do if I'm not on the house team?" Malfoy complained. Harry gave a hollow laugh.

"Harry Potter bought a Nimbus Two Thousand last year after he challenged Higgs to a seeker duel. He won too and then they let him be bloody seeker. He's not even that good, and he's definitely not a good Slytherin. Harry bloody Potter and his damned fame. They just let him be on the team because he's famous for having some stupid scar on his forehead. I am so much better at Quidditch than he is." Malfoy looked at some skulls that caught his eye.

"Everyone really hates him though. The Slytherins hate him for getting rid of the Dark Lord and the Gryffindors hate him for being in Slytherin. The Hufflepuffs are too scared to do anything that would go against both Gryffindor and Slytherin, and the Ravenclaws just don't give a damn. He's got a few friends though. Zabini, Davis, Moon, and the Mudblood Granger. I hate him though. I offered to befriend him at first, but then Potter got uppity with me. He insulted me father! The teachers ignored it though. It's okay, it's Potter, the Golden Boy. He's so smart and wonderful. Wonderful Potter with his scar and his broomstick." Harry and Blaise shared a grin.

Mr. Malfoy sighed. "You have told me this at least half a dozen times already," he said with a quelling look at his son. Malfoy shuddered violently and dropped the skull he had been holding. "Be careful around Potter. He is an unknown entity. He was obviously sorted into Slytherin for a reason, and we still don't know how he made the Dark Lord disappear. I would like to understand that before we decide how to deal with him, one way or ano— ah Mr. Borgin."

A man had appeared behind the counter, his back stooped and his greasy hair hanging about his face reminding them of Snape. He ran his hand through the greasy locks and pushed them aside.

"Mr. Malfoy, what a pleasure to see you again. It has been too long. And young Master Malfoy as well— truly delighted to be of service. How can I help you today? I've just recently acquired a couple of items I'm sure you would love to have enter your possession, they are just here beyond the—"

"I'm not buying today Borgin, but selling."

The smile on Borgin's face faded ever so slightly. "Selling," he repeated, somewhat distracted.

"The Ministry has begun to interfere with some of the more prominent families. That poor flea-bitten Muggle-loving pathetic excuse for a wizard, Arthur Weasley, has been spearheading some new legislation, some foolish Muggle Protection Act or other, and the Ministry has seen fit to conduct raids. As you can see certain of these poisons might make it appear—"

"Yes, I understand sir, of course," Borgin said briskly.

"Damn Weasley again, if it isn't one it's another isn't it, Harry?" Blaise asked.

"I haven't even told you about Ginny," Harry said quietly. Blaise looked interested. Harry put a finger to his lips, wanting to listen.

"Let me see," began Borgin as he scrutinized the list Mr. Malfoy had provided.

"I want that," Malfoy interrupted, pointing at the Hand of Glory, his eyes glittering menacingly.

"Ah, the Hand of Glory!" exclaimed Mr. Borgin, dropping the list and rushing to Malfoy's side. "Insert a candle into the hand and it only gives light to the holder. Best friend to plunderers and thieves. Your son has excellent taste, if I do say so myself, sir."

"I sincerely my hope my son will amount to more than a common thief, Borgin," Mr. Malfoy said coldly. Malfoy's eyes drooped and his shoulders sagged.

"Though if his grades don't pick up, that may well be all he is suited for."

"It's not my fault, father," snapped Draco. "The teachers handpick their favorites. That Mudblood Granger—"

"I should think you would be ashamed that a girl of no Wizarding parents managed to beat you in every exam."

"Yeah, us too," muttered Blaise. Harry suppressed a snort.

Draco had no retort to that so Mr. Malfoy turned back to Borgin. "Perhaps now we can return to my list, I'm in a bit of a hurry. I have other plans to attend to.

They began to haggle. Draco wandered around the shop, looking at different objects. He was drawn inexplicably towards their hiding place in the cabinet. Harry and Blaise ceased breathing. He drew closer, his hand reached out slowly, he walked forward—

"Done. Come Draco." Malfoy's hand, which had just reached the handle, pulled back, but he had already grabbed the handle and let it go, shutting the cabinet door closed. Harry and Blaise were sucked through the cabinet and suddenly fell out of the cabinet, landing sprawled over each other in a heap somewhere in the vicinity of dungeons.

"What the bloody hell was that?" Blaise asked, dusting himself off as they disentangled themselves.

"I have no idea," Harry said. They looked around when they heard a very familiar meow. There was a door just passed them which they opened to peek out and saw:

"Hogwarts!" they exclaimed simultaneously. Blaise and Harry looked at each other and froze when Mrs. Norris turned the corner. She gave a hiss in surprise, then in pain when the two Slytherins pulled their legs back and kicked her clear across the hallway.

"Yes!" they cried and high-fived each other. They quickly jumped back into the cabinet they had fallen out of and closed the door. Seconds later they reappeared in a heap in Borgin and Burkes. The duo quickly extricated themselves from the sticky situation and fled Knockturn Alley.

Breathing heavily and glancing backwards warily, they made their way to Flourish and Blotts.

"What the bloody hell was that cabinet, you reckon?" Harry asked Blaise as they walked towards the store.

"If I had to guess I'd say it was a vanishing cabinet. But what it was doing in Hogwarts..." The two boys shared a meaningful look.

"I guess there isn't much to be done about it; one more mystery to be left unsolved."

"Well we may as well get the books," Harry said resignedly.

"If we can make it through all these people to find them all." Blaise said sarcastically. He was right though. The bookstore was packed with people. Harry and Blaise made their way through the store, shoving smaller people out of the way and maneuvering around the taller ones. They managed to find the Transfiguration book and grabbed three copies of grade two, and Harry remembered to snag one for Astoria that was grade one. As they wondered where to find the section for Lockhart's books, Blaise scathingly suggested the Fiction section which they had halfheartedly checked and to their surprise had found Lockhart himself.

"Well here's what the commotion is about," Harry said as they ducked down and each grabbed two sets of the books for school.

"Hey you forgot a set for Daphne," Harry remarked idly.

"Nah, I'm just not gonna buy any of the books. I have a bad feeling about Lockhart being here—" No sooner had Blaise finished his sentence did Lockhart speak up.

"Bless my soul— Harry Potter!" Harry groaned while Blaise snickered into his hand. Lockhart's photographer seemed to Apparate to Harry's side and Blaise could only give Harry one piece of advice before he was whisked away: "Make him look like an idiot, Harry."

Thankfully, Harry was hit by a future memory of Lockhart on his way to the front. Apparently, his future counterpart had endured the same treatment, and Lockhart would be announcing his new job: the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher at Hogwarts. Some other

random tidbits also assaulted him: like how Lockhart's dearest ambition was to market his own line of hair care potions, and how he won the most charming smile award five years running. But what to do? Harry thought quickly; he was approaching those blindingly white teeth and his thoughts were quickly becoming disoriented. It all came down to one question: make him look like a bumbling fool, or pretend to be in awe of him and assume he's too thick to realize he's being had? Both were promising and Harry had to choose and fast.

Lockhart grabbed Harry around the shoulders and wrapped him in a firm sidearm hug.

"Nice big smile, Harry," Lockhart said through his own gleaming teeth. "Together you and I are worth the front page."

Harry gave his own dazzling smile which caused Blaise to smirk. He noticed Daphne and Astoria walking into the store as well and suppressed a groan.

"I'm so glad I'm finally able to meet you, Mr. Lockhart," Harry said sweetly, his eyes glittering maliciously. Lockhart, of course, took it as Harry being star struck.

"And I you, Harry Potter. As a matter of fact, you'll be pleased to know, as I'm sure everyone else will be—" Here Lockhart cleared his throat and raised his voice to ensure it carried above the oohs and ahs of the crowd, "that I have decided to take on the post of Defense Against the Dark Arts Teacher at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry." The audience burst into applause.

Harry caught Blaise's eye and had a fleeting thought— was Lockhart whom Dobby was warning him about— but quickly rid himself of it.

"You'll be my Professor then? Will you teach me how to be famous and how to market my own line of hair care products?" Harry asked eagerly. Lockhart had the good grace to blush. The audience all laughed uproariously.

"Well now Harry, as noble a goal as that is —it is my secret ambition of course— I hope my future students are taking notes because there will be a test— you will be getting the real Magical Me as it were, and

I take great pride in pursuing the noble art of teaching after all my previous accomplishments."

"Your accomplishments are almost as famous as mine," Harry said with a small smirk. The audience laughed again, cheering their Boy-Who-Lived.

Before Lockhart could interject his comment, Harry remembered one other tidbit. Harry fired home the parting blow: "Professor, I was looking into jobs and was wondering if you knew the memory charm, since it's a requirement for the Obliviation squad."

Lockhart, for some inexplicable reason, began to sweat. His normally pristine hair flopped and sweat trickled down his forehead. He was rapidly going pale.

Instead of responding he shoved his complete stack of works into Harry's hands, forcing Harry to stagger slightly under the unexpected weight and he dragged himself out of the limelight where he reached Daphne, Astoria, and Blaise. He tipped the set of books into Astoria's cauldron and looked at Blaise.

"Looks like you're getting a set of his books after all."

Ginny Weasley appeared out of nowhere, along with Draco Malfoy, although they definitely didn't show up together. That was left up to the imagination.

"Bet you loved that, didn't you, Potter?" Harry straightened up from his comment to Blaise and locked eyes with Draco Malfoy, Harry's green boring directly into Malfoy's grey.

"Famous Harry Potter," sneered Malfoy. "Can't even go into a bookstore without making the front page."

"Is that jealousy I detect, Malfoy? Are you angry that I am famous for my own talents, rather than my father's?" drawled Harry, imitating Malfoy's voice impeccably.

"I don't do jealousy, Potter," snapped Malfoy.

"Apparently you also don't do witty comebacks. Obviously the sorting hat never considered you for Ravenclaw."

"You're just famous for a stupid scar, Potter. Go enjoy your fame."

"Leave him alone, he didn't want any of that!" snapped Ginny Weasley surprisingly. Harry had never really exchanged a word in person with her. Blaise looked at Harry questioningly but Harry merely looked at him blankly. He did notice Ron Weasley coming up along side Malfoy though.

"Potter, you've got yourself a girlfriend!" drawled Malfoy, feeling as if he had regained the upper hand. "Better blood-traitors than Mudbloods I suppose." Pandemonium erupted.

"GIRLFRIEND?" Ron attacked Harry when he heard his sister being called Harry's girlfriend. Harry was thrown backwards by the surprise attack. He saw Hermione appear out of nowhere, her books thrown into Ginny's cauldron and her wand pointed at Malfoy's most prized possessions.

For some inexplicable reason he saw another redhead rolling on the ground with hair that seemed to change between blond and brown every second he glanced at it. It took a moment to realize it was Astoria since he was in the middle of a fist fight with Ron Weasley. He was painfully reminded of that when Weasley's fist connected with the side of Harry's head. Enraged, Harry ducked the next punch and fought through the pain to land a vicious uppercut to Weasley's jaw, throwing him back into the approaching form of Mr. Malfoy.

Furious, Mr. Malfoy grabbed Weasley by the scruff of the neck and tossed him aside. Arthur Weasley, whom had also arrived, launched himself at Lucius and the two of them began to fight in earnest. Ron was up again and he glared at the trio of Slytherins. Daphne managed to get him to agree to pull apart Astoria and Ginny, but before they could, two things happened very quickly. Hagrid appeared and yelled out: "Break it up there gents, break it up." and he tried to pull the two adults apart. He didn't get very far when Ginny pulled a wand on Astoria and shrieked a spell whose name no one could decipher through the noise. Astoria wisely ducked. Hagrid wasn't as lucky.

Hagrid's bogies flew out of his nose, transformed into bats, and began attacking the groundskeeper in earnest. He had a few stuck in his beard and was fiercely swatting at the little buggers.

Daphne and Ron finally grabbed their respective sisters and hauled them off to the side for some serious berating. Lucius had fallen near Ginny's cauldron and used it to pick himself up, but his hand slipped into the cauldron. He pulled himself back out and stood up, glaring at Arthur Weasley.

"Fighting like a common Muggle are you? Is nothing beneath you nowadays? You really have disgraced the name of wizard, the likes of which the pureblood community has never before seen. The company you keep, Weasley. And you seem to take after them in their clearly violent and destructive patterns. Best to watch your step, wouldn't want to leave your brood on their own."

"Is that a threat, Malfoy?" Arthur asked, his eyes glittering dangerously. The children all watched in fascination.

"It is whatever you make of it, Weasley." Malfoy gripped his cane possessively, his hand seemingly itching to grab the wand out of the top. "Come Draco, there is no need to lower ourselves by being around this filth."

The Malfoys vacated the premise and an odd group was left looking at each other. Hagrid had left, trying to rid himself of the bat bogeys. Ginny and Hermione were sorting through their books in Ginny's cauldron. Ron was standing awkwardly to the side trying to look intimidating but failing miserably. Harry and Blaise had begun to converse in low tones, with Harry relaying the details of the correspondence he had shared with the female Weasley over the summer. Blaise snickered into his hand as he realized he was looking at the fan girl. She had just handed Hermione another small book and was ogling Harry, who groaned.

"That was really brave of you, Harry," Ginny said sweetly, batting her eyelashes at him while blushing bright red. Harry ignored her in favor of glaring at Hermione.

"I noticed you had your wand pointed at Malfoy's—jewels—," Harry said neutrally.

Hermione had the good grace to blush. "I don't need you fighting my battles, especially when you don't even consider me enough of a friend to write." Harry stalked off without waiting for a response. He

was still seeing black spots at the edge of his vision from the punch Ron had connected to his head, and he was still angry with Lily, Hermione, and Tracey for not writing. Harry swiftly paid for his Transfiguration book, not bothering to buy Lockhart's books as the pompous git had given them to him already, and headed for the Leaky Cauldron, Blaise hot on his heels.

"What's wrong with you, Potter?"

Harry was about to snap an angry retort at Blaise but held his tongue. "I dunno Blaise. Just not feeling too well. Headache," Harry added as further explanation. Blaise shrugged and they said goodbye to Mrs. Greengrass before flooing back to Zabini Manor. Harry fell out of the fireplace and landed in a heap on the floor of the room. This was definitely not his preferred method of travel.

Chapter 10: The Banes of Harry's Existence

Life at Zabini Manor was as different as possible from life on Privet Drive. Harry was actually noticed and greeted positively here for starters. No more nasty glances thrown his way when he was looking, nor did he have endless chores and limited food to deal with either. The guest room Blaise had him staying in was bigger than his Aunt and Uncle's room and the whole house had such a warm atmosphere when compared to the Durlseys. Where Aunt Petunia forced everything to be spotless to an almost sterile degree, Mrs. Zabini was more relaxed and had everything cleaned, but still lived in. It was a refreshing change for Harry and he was absorbing every second of it.

Another exciting part of course was that magic existed in the manor; everything seemed to live off it. The dishes washed themselves, the plants decorating the interior pulsed and moved to an invisible conductor, the stairs played tricks on you, and there were even some secret passages that reminded Harry of Hogwarts. All in all, the house just seemed alive. That, more than anything else, really brought home the true wonders of magic.

Mr. Zabini, Harry soon discovered, was a very paranoid man. The funny thing was: he was afraid that his wife would try to kill him. As Harry had found out, she was on her eighth and he had outlasted the longest by a few years. Every day he regarded as his last, and every friendly movement was treated as hostile and life-threatening. Mrs. Zabini confided in him one day after he had been cursed by no less than four spells when he passed the potatoes at dinner that she had no plans of killing this husband... yet. She smiled at Harry and sent him off with Blaise while Harry was working out whether or not she had been joking.

The remainder of the summer went by too quickly for Harry's liking. On the bright side, Blaise had been teaching him about pureblood culture, off and on at least.

"So your name is the most important thing about the pureblood society," Harry recited obediently.

"Exactly," Blaise said with a wry grin. "How far back you can trace your lineage is extremely important. However, what you lack in

ancestry you generally can make up by wealth. And wealth can attract a noble family to marry into."

"Now there are some traditions you have to understand. Some of them, I don't know myself and will start learning probably next summer or the summer after, but some I can tell you know."

"Like what?" Harry asked curiously.

"Well, when a pureblood gives his word on something, it's binding. You don't break your word."

"What happens if you do?"

"I don't think you understand, Harry. You don't break your word. That's all there is to it."

"Well, hypothetically speaking, what would happen if you were to break your word?"

"Hypothetically speaking?" Blaise asked incredulously. "How long have you been hanging around my Dad?"

Harry chuckled. Mr. Zabini was always going on about hypothetical situations. The word had stuck in Harry's vocabulary. Mr. Zabini had asked Harry to follow him around the house for a day to make up for trying to kill him. He had picked up on some of the older man's language habits.

"Enough," Harry said with a grin. "Enough to know that for some strange reason he can't smell very well."

"Who, Dad?"

"Yeah."

"Oh. He claims it's from a bludger breaking his nose and ruining his sinuses but come on, what is magic for? Mum thinks he has some genetic defect."

"That's weird."

"Yeah, I feel kind of bad though. Well," Blaise paused. "Not really. Makes pranking lots easier. He hates almonds; I mean absolutely detests them. So, of course, I snuck some into his pie one night. He took a huge bite and thought Mum was trying to kill him. It's pretty funny. He does so many spells to check for things since he can't smell, it takes longer to screen the food then it does to eat it."

Harry snorted. "Back to my question though. What would happen?"

"Well, your name is only as good as your word, like I told you at the sorting last year. You just don't break a promise. Depending on the severity of the broken promise, you could lose your magic. It's not something you want to mess around with. Promise me that you won't take promises lightly."

Blaise blinked. Then Harry blinked. Then they laughed at the absurdity of that statement.

"Seriously though, just be careful what you promise. Can't be friends with a squib can I?"

Harry clapped him on the back and the two went outside to throw the quaffle.

The last evening they were staying at the Manor brought on an incredible feast

prepared by the house elves. It was, quite frankly, amazing. Harry let his jaw drop at the variety of foods at the table.

"Well don't just stand there," Blaise said and he shoved Harry towards a chair. Harry grabbed a chicken and started devouring it, previously unaware of how hungry he had been. Packing apparently took a lot out of you. Blaise shook his head at Harry but the smile betrayed him. He pulled up a chair and began to eat as well, albeit slower than Harry.

Harry was just working on his treacle tart when he heard Mr. Zabini scream.

"ALMONDS!" he thundered. "Are you trying to kill me, woman?" Mrs. Zabini smiled at her husband. "Of course not, dear. And almonds

won't kill you. Just because you don't like something doesn't mean it is going to kill you."

"Doesn't mean that it isn't going to kill you either though," Blaise muttered.

Mrs. Zabini shot Blaise her look that always shut Blaise up and today was no exception. Blaise bit hungrily into his chicken and wisely kept his eyes on the table.

They went to sleep quickly and woke up early the next morning to head back to Hogwarts. Harry gathered a few last minute things and they met Mr. Zabini at the door.

"Well, grab on then. We'll be Side-Along Apparating you." Harry grasped Mr. Zabini's arm, smirking when the man winced from contact, and the two of them Disapparated, appearing moments later at King's Cross. Mrs. Zabini and Blaise followed a moment later.

The quartet appeared on Platform 9 & $\frac{3}{4}$ and Harry and Blaise said their goodbyes to Mr. and Mrs. Zabini, Harry thanking them profusely for their hospitality, which was waved off, and then turned to head to the train. The elder Zabinis Disapparated, leaving the two second years to stow their trunks and prepare for their second year of Hogwarts.

Harry and Blaise walked to the train, dodging a couple over eager children running around chasing each other, and boarded the train. They headed to the back looking for a compartment and found one with Lily and Tracey already inside. Blaise glanced at Harry, who shrugged, and the two entered the compartment, greeted the girls, although Harry's greeting was somewhat cold, and stored their luggage.

The compartment was filled with an awkward silence for a few minutes as Harry stoically refused to speak to either girl, rationalizing that they had chosen not to speak to him first. Lily, stubborn as always, broke the silence.

SMACK!

"What the bloody hell was that for?" Harry yelled, rubbing his cheek.

"Well, first you don't answer any of my mail, and now you refuse to speak to me?"

"Any of your mail?" Harry cried incredulously. "You never sent me any! None of you did. Except Ginny bloody Weasley. A girl I've never even met!"

The other three began shouting in protest when the compartment door opened and Daphne and Astoria walked in. Daphne put up her luggage and then looked questioningly at all the yelling people. Astoria walked over to Harry, who had begun shouting in earnest as well, and hugged him around the middle. Harry almost didn't notice at first; Astoria was shorter than he was and he was in a heated argument, but then she lifted her head off his chest, bumping his jaw and forcing him to involuntarily bite his tongue. Harry let out a roar of frustration and stormed out of the compartment.

Daphne and Astoria looked around at the red faces.

"What happened?" Daphne asked.

"Potter's being an annoying piece of s—"

"Why were you all yelling?" Astoria asked quietly, cutting Lily off.

"Harry was slightly upset that they," here Blaise motioned to Lily and Tracey, "never wrote to him. Lily slapped him for being a git, and said she did write to him."

"I never saw any letters from you guys when we were at Harry's," Daphne said.

"Well we all wrote to him," piped up Tracey, who had been mostly quiet, letting Lily do most of the vocal arguing.

"Maybe someone was intercepting his mail," suggested Astoria.

"It's possible," replied Blaise. "My owl always came back empty. But he said Ginny Weasley's got through."

"Maybe only Harry's owl can bring him letters?" asked Tracey.

"No, the Hogwarts letter was there."

"Why don't we go talk to him?" Astoria said, grabbing her sister and pulling her out of the compartment.

Astoria began walking and Daphne fell into step beside her.

"You never told me why you fought Weasley in Diagon Alley, Astoria. It was not very proper at all."

"Well, she was being rude."

"How so?"

"Talking back to Malfoy and saying she was Harry's girlfriend."

"Since when do you call him Harry?" Astoria blushed but bravely continued.

"Then when her brother started fighting Harry she gave me a smug look and acted like she was better than me. Then she had the nerve to flip me off."

Daphne showed nothing but on the inside Astoria knew she had surprised her sister. "So you attacked her?" Daphne asked wearily.

Astoria looked down at the floor. "It worked didn't it?"

"That would depend on what you were trying to accomplish. What was really on your mind, Astoria?"

"Harry!" Astoria called suddenly, making Daphne turn her head. Harry had just opened the compartment door again and returned, looking somewhat calmer.

"You know they really were writing you letters. You should give them a chance," Astoria said innocently. Harry still looked somewhat angry, so Daphne stepped in to help. She lightly rapped him upside the head with her knuckles.

"They're still your friends, Harry, and that hasn't changed," Daphne said astutely.

Harry's resolve collapsed slightly. "I just thought it wasn't real anymore, you know?" he confided. "I was only getting letters from a lovesick fan girl, and then I get knocked out by a stupid house elf."

"Do you think the house elf intercepted the mail?" Astoria whispered. Harry whipped his head to look at her. The question had been posed to Daphne.

"Crap," Harry said eloquently, running his hand through his hair. "That means I might owe Granger an apology."

"How did you arrive to that?" Daphne asked curiously.

"I might have— told her off— when I stormed out."

Flashback.

"Harry!" Hermione cried out as he stormed through the hallway.

"Wha— oh. It's you." Harry kept walking.

"What's wrong?" she asked tentatively.

"Oh, so now you want to talk to me? Well if you didn't deem me important enough to talk to over the summer I don't see how you are worth my time now, Mudblood," sneered Harry. Hermione burst into tears and ran off into a nearby compartment. Harry stood there a moment, relishing in the newfound feeling of anger. After awhile, he passed by the compartment and thought he heard a quill scratching, but really didn't care. He was enjoying being angry.

End flashback.

"Yeah, you screwed up," piped up Astoria. Harry looked at her in shock, and then turned to Daphne.

"Don't look at me; I don't know where she gets it from. She'll be in Gryffindor at this rate," retorted Daphne. Astoria glared half-heartedly at her sister before walking off to a first-year compartment, her head held proudly. She patted Harry's arm on the way.

"Good luck with that," she whispered conspiratorially, motioning vaguely in Daphne's direction, before walking off, her dirty blond hair

swaying from side to side, reflecting different shades of her hair every time it moved.

Harry stared after her, then shook his head and returned to their compartment, Daphne following in his wake. Tracey and Lily looked expectantly at him. Harry sighed and ran a hand through his hair.

"Daphne and Astoria think that a crazy house-elf was intercepting my mail. That seems highly plausible. So I guess I'm trying to say, I didn't mean to get so mad at you guys. It wasn't exactly your fault. I was just having trouble remembering that all of this was real, as well as being annoyed by that bloody fan-girl, Weasley. Granted, I did start that correspondence, I just didn't think it would be so annoying. Read these." Harry pulled the letters out from his trunk and handed them around. Lily, her anger forgotten, began reading through them swiftly. Tracey, still glaring, shot him a look before grabbing one of the offered letters as well. Blaise snickered and took one to share with Daphne.

They all read the letters in silence. At least until they found something comical.

"Is this for real, Harry?" asked Blaise. "Listen everyone: 'I feel like I know you so well already, Harry. I'm really glad we're friends, I feel like we could be best friends. I want to be with you in Slytherin.' Best friends huh? I thought I had that position under wraps."

"Nope," countered Harry. "I'm still hiring. I heard Lockhart was looking for an interview..."

Blaise coughed abruptly. Harry grinned triumphantly.

"What is this rubbish?" asked Lily suddenly. "Listen to this: 'The last time I freaked out, I just kept looking down. I can't wait to see you again.' Sounds like a love song. You weren't kidding, Monsieur Potter."

Harry merely put his head in his hands in mock embarrassment.

"And this?" asked Tracey questioningly. "Is she honestly serious about this stuff? 'I've known you since I was a baby of course. My Mum always told me stories about the Boy-who-lived every night

before I went to sleep.' How'd you get her to tell you that one, Harry?"

Harry looked up, surprised that Tracey was now calling him Harry. "Nice to see you're calling me Harry now, Tracey." The blond valiantly fought off her blush, only allowing slight warmth to come up to her cheeks. She was spared an answer by the food trolley. Each of them bought some treats and they swapped around candy and the letters around for awhile. Harry and Blaise teamed up to play Lily and Tracey in chess, while Daphne opted to take a nap.

Malfoy stopped by to see them after a few more games had been played. Harry and Tracey had just about finished off Lily and Blaise when the compartment door slid open.

"Potter," sneered Malfoy.

"Malfoy," Harry returned.

"So how were your filthy Muggle re—?"

"I'm a bit busy at the moment, Malfoy. If you're going to insult me could you please do it later, I'm about to win here."

Malfoy glared at being interrupted.

"You better watch your back, Potter. You're not going to have a very pleasant year. Tough luck about losing out on the Seeker position. At least we have someone better now."

Startled, Harry looked away from the game. Tracey took the opportunity to quietly checkmate the black king while Harry locked eyes with Malfoy.

"What do you mean, losing out on the Seeker position? Who are you saying is better?" Malfoy stuck his chest out proudly. Harry snorted.

"Surely, you're joking. You?" Harry asked incredulously. "We'll never win a match. I doubt you could catch a quaffle, let alone the snitch."

Malfoy sputtered. He was about to fire a retort when Harry calmly cut him off.

"On an unrelated subject, would you be interested in selling me a house-elf?"

Malfoy looked at Harry questioningly. "What are you on about, Potter?"

"A house-elf. You know, about yay high," Harry held his hand out to the approximate height of Dobby, "droopy ears, obey your orders, the works. I wanted to purchase one, I thought about buying one of yours. Preferably one that likes socks." Harry couldn't resist adding the last bit, remembering Dobby's fondness of socks mid-speech.

"I— I must ask—"

"Your father, right," Harry finished. "That's fine. Let me know will you?" Harry returned his attention to the game, leaving Malfoy to stare bewildered at him.

"Whoa, you finished it, Trace?" Harry asked, signaling to Malfoy the conversation was over. The arrogant git stuck up his aristocratic nose, nodded sharply, and walked out.

"Yes. Checkmate." She flashed a smile at Harry, causing him to grin back at her. "Excellent. I always had trouble beating Blaise."

"So?" Blaise asked, raising an eyebrow questioningly and jerking his head towards the door.

"We'll see," Harry grinned. Harry had told Blaise about his plans to get Dobby working for him and Blaise had thought it hilarious at first, and then realized they might be able to get some Malfoy secrets out of him. He wholeheartedly supported it.

"We'd better get changed; we're coming to the station," Daphne said.

Harry and Blaise left the compartment to give them privacy and took their trunks with them. They entered a nearby compartment and changed. The train came to a stop as they had just finished putting on their robes.

"Out of curiosity, Blaise, why'd you decide to be friends with me anyway?"

Blaise looked back at him curiously. "I may have or may not have decided I didn't like Malfoy very much, and any enemy of Malfoy..."

"Fair enough," Harry said with a shrug. "It was just strange, going from not really having any friends to getting three."

"Well, Lily is generally pretty friendly to everyone, and Tracey likes hanging out with her. So, that was pretty easy. And, you lucked out by becoming friends with someone as awesome as I am. I also did bet myself that I would make you into a better pureblood. It became pretty obvious that you don't know a whole about Wizarding culture, and I'm always up for a challenge."

"Good luck with that," Harry replied and they shared a laugh. It looked like Harry had finally secured himself a best friend.

"After you, Monsieur Zabini," motioned Harry and Blaise moved to open the compartment door. The only problem was:

"What the hell?" Blaise said. He tried to pull open the door but it wouldn't budge. Harry tried an *alohamora*, but it still remained steadfastly locked.

"How are we going to get out?" Blaise wondered aloud.

Harry tried the window but it was also locked. Harry stared at the door for a few seconds. "*Finite Incantatem*," Harry intoned. They tried opening the door again but they still didn't have any success.

"Try ramming it," Harry suggested. The two boys threw themselves at the door only to bounce back, painfully.

"This is your fault, Harry," Blaise said calmly.

"WHAT?" Harry shouted, scandalized.

"Relax, I'm only joking. Although I think that whoever locked us in did it because you're in here, not because I'm in here."

Harry groaned. "Try breaking the window," Blaise suggested. Harry threw his trunk at it in irritation but nothing happened. Frustrated, Harry threw a *reducto* at the window, only to see it rebound right at his head.

"DUCK!" Blaise yelled, and Harry dodged just in time. The curse sailed over his head and into the compartment door, where it again reflected before Blaise managed to cast a shield charm to absorb the curse.

"Ok, let's do this the Muggle way," Harry said. He began to take apart the window at the hinges and as the train began moving Harry finally managed to get it open.

"Hah!" They quickly shrunk their trunks and threw them out, then jumped out of the moving train. Harry had Hedwig's cage in his hand and he let her out only to have her cuff him angrily on his head before stretching her wings and flying away.

"Well that was nice of her," commented Harry grumpily as he rubbed his head gingerly.

"We'd better get going if we don't want to miss the Sorting."

The second-year Slytherin duo sprinted to the Great Hall and managed to drop their trunks off at the front steps before opening the doors and finding themselves greeted by applause.

The two of them glanced at each other and Harry bowed extravagantly.

"Please come up here when I call your name," spoke McGonagall.

Blaise smacked him. "That was for the Sorting Hat you prat. Come on, let's grab a seat."

They slid as inconspicuously as possible into their seats at the Slytherin table near Daphne, Tracey, and Lily, before turning their eyes to the Sorting.

"Creevey, Colin," McGonagall called.

A small, mousy haired boy clambered onto the seat and put the hat on. After a few seconds that hat proclaimed "GRYFFINDOR!" prompting hisses from the majority of the Slytherins at the table.

A few more students were sorted, one into Slytherin, where he was greeted with a subdued clapping, two into Ravenclaw, one into Hufflepuff, and another one into Gryffindor before "Greengrass, Astoria."

Astoria walked confidently up to the stool and sat into it, allowing the hat to be placed on her head. Unconsciously, Daphne gripped Blaise's hand under the table, but made no other outward reaction to her sister being sorted. About a minute passed before the hat finally spoke.

"Slytherin," it said, although it didn't sound too enthusiastic about the house chosen. Astoria walked happily to their table. Harry shot her a questioning glance but he let it go after he saw the big grin that appeared on her face. She sat next to Harry and Daphne and beamed at everyone.

The sorting continued on and Harry filled everyone in on what happened in the compartment. They all made lists of possible culprits before Harry was jerked out of his thoughts.

"Weasley, Ginevra," Professor McGonagall called. A short, petite redhead walked up with a huff, before brazenly correcting the deputy headmistress by whispering "Ginny," quite fiercely, before the hat was placed atop her head. She was the last student so Harry was quite anxious to eat. He expected it to call out Gryffindor fairly quickly. His expectations weren't fulfilled completely.

About a minute passed and it was plain that the youngest Weasley was having a fierce conversation with the hat. It seemed to open its brim once before it stopped and returned to her. Then: "GRY—" but it stopped again, continuing to have a conversation with the redhead. Finally, the more stubborn of the pair won out, one way or another. "GRYFFINDOR!" shouted the hat. Ginny took off the hat and walked sedately to the Gryffindor table, eyeing Harry all the way. She seemed to glare at Harry, until he realized her aim was off. He followed her eyes to Astoria and blinked.

The food appeared on the table and further thought was driven out of Harry's head as he dove into the mouth-watering feast. Astoria apologized and left to sit with her fellow first years. They all bid her a farewell and dug into the meal. After sitting in a companionable silence to calm their roaring stomachs, Harry talked with Tracey

about how potions would be this year, since she generally partnered him in that class. The two of them were in a spirited discussion over what types of potions Snape would make them brew.

"I still say he's going to make us do poisons," Harry said firmly. "They're easier than antidotes, and knowing him he'll probably poison us with one of them to test it out. Two-to-one odds it's me; though I wouldn't say no to Lockhart, if he's as annoying as he was over the summer."

"It will almost have to be antidotes," countered Tracey. "He'll want to push us and be sure we know what we're doing. It also gives him ammunition against the Gryffindors because most of them are liable to mess everything up in any potion more complicated than a pepper-up potion."

Harry waved his hand dismissively and was about to counter when Lily caught his attention.

"Don't you just love Lockhart?" she said with a sigh. Harry snorted.

"You have got to be joking," moaned Harry. "Is there a sane female Slytherin here anywhere?" Harry held a hand to his forehead as if shielding his eyes to aid him in his search for said female. Blaise chuckled feebly.

"You really need to work on your material, mate," commented Blaise airily.

"Silence!" Harry cried. "I kill you!" He mock stabbed his finger into Blaise's chest and Blaise groaned in mortal agony.

Lily glared half-heartedly, while Daphne aided Blaise in his theatrics— by shoving him out of his chair. Tracey covered up a highly un-Tracey like snort which caused everyone to stare before bursting into more laughter. Some of the older Slytherins glared menacingly at their immaturity. Harry never noticed two Gryffindors staring wistfully at the group of friends who were laughing and having a good time.

The first day of classes were universally dreaded by the students of Hogwarts. After they had all gone down for breakfast the next morning, Harry dreaded receiving his timetable. When Harry

received it from Snape he let out a groan and banged his head against the table. He closed his eyes, counted to three, and opened them.

"Alright, Harry?" asked Tracey in some concern.

"I was hoping I read the schedule wrong."

"Ah," Tracey said intelligently, patting Harry on the arm.

"What's first?" asked Lily, delicately cutting her omelet.

"Transfiguration and Charms today won't be too bad," Daphne said.

"Yes, but look at Friday: Snape and Lockhart on the same day? Absolute torture. Is Dumbledore trying to kill me?"

"Well at least we're mostly free tomorrow. Only double Herbology with the Ravenclaws. That won't be too bad," Blaise countered, trying to cheer Harry up. But Harry was beyond any efforts of cheerfulness.

Transfiguration with McGonagall was precise and to the point, or more accurately, the button. They were transfiguring beetles into buttons, and Harry was succeeding effortlessly. He felt like no wrong could occur today. He was quite pleased, and his smile lasted through charms.

They were learning the Engorgement Charm, using the incantation engorgio on some buttons, which he also mastered, and his smile grew, until Lily offered to cancel the apparent Engorgement charm she claimed had been cast on his ego. Harry scowled and the period finished fairly quickly after that.

Much later, Harry realized that no day could go that perfectly. His good mood disappeared faster than a vanishing spell could have worked when he was in the courtyard walking with Tracey and Blaise. Lily had needed to go to the library and Daphne was checking on her sister.

"Harry Potter?" squeaked a mousy looking boy. Harry vaguely remembered him being sorted.

When Harry looked at him he seemed to blush redder than Weasley's hair in a matter of moments. In his hands he clutched what appeared to be a Muggle camera.

"Err– yes?"

Harry didn't think it possible but he went redder still. Harry was about to check if he had stopped breathing when he finally spoke. It seemed as if he had been holding his breath and said it all at once.

"I."

"I'm sorry," Harry said, sounding anything but, "but you'll have to speak slower than that."

"I'm Colin C–Creevey. I wanted to take a—" here words failed the boy and he held up his camera hopefully.

"A picture?" Harry repeated blankly. This kid couldn't be serious.

Apparently, he took Harry's question as encouragement and began talking in earnest. "I want to be able to prove I've met you. I know all about you of course. How amazing you were when you were just a baby. How you defeated you-know-who and survived with only a really cool looking lightning-bolt scar," his eyes flicked upward to Harry's scar. If it weren't for Tracey's reassuring touch on his arm Harry would have already throttled the kid.

"Plus, someone told me if I develop the film right I can make the pictures move," he continued, oblivious to Harry's growing anger. "Isn't that amazing? Magic is so magical. My Dad's a milkman and we had no idea what I was doing was magic. I'm taking pictures of everything to show him what it's like here. If I could get one of you—after all you're famous," he added unnecessarily, causing Blaise to snort, "and maybe one of your friends could take it and I could stand with you," Creepy— Creevey rather, gazed imploringly, silently begging Harry to agree while really only burying himself further into a hole, "and maybe you could sign it after?"

Before Harry could emphatically tell the stupid Muggleborn no, Draco Malfoy walked up.

"Really, Potter? Signed photos? You're giving out signed photos?"

His voice, loud and mocking, echoed throughout the courtyard. Crabbe and Goyle, flanking him, let out hearty laughter at the wit of their leader.

"Everyone line up, Potter here is giving out signed photos!" he yelled in glee.

"Were you hoping for a picture with me to hang up next to your poster of Lockhart in the dorm?" Harry shot back. Malfoy turned red.

"What's this?" asked someone who was quickly working in his way onto Harry's top five hated people list, also known as the Banes of Harry's existence, which previously consisted of, in descending order: Voldemort, Snape, Malfoy, Weasley, and the Dursleys but now breaking into the top five: Lockhart; although, to be fair, Creevey wasn't far behind. Lockhart, however, had taken Harry's ability to tear Creevey limb from limb, thus escalating his lack of worth.

"Who's giving out signed photos? And who has a poster of me in their dormitory? He asked with a blinding smile. Harry wondered how long it took him to get his teeth that white and how angry he'd be if Harry charmed them yellow. He smiled maliciously, but Lockhart took it for genuine.

"Harry Potter. Of course, why did I ask?" Lockhart laughed at his own joke.

"We meet again, Harry! And once more with a photographer. Why don't you take a picture of both of us then, Mr. Creevey," Lockhart said, beaming.

"I don't believe he wanted a picture with you in it, Lockhart," retorted Harry through gritted teeth, angry that once again Lockhart was draping an arm over his shoulder. "And remove your arm from my shoulder before I remove it from yours," Harry said dangerously.

Colin looked hesitant at taking the photo; Harry was looking downright murderous. He fumbled with the camera and shakily took the picture as the bell rang. Harry swiftly extricated himself from Lockhart's arm and left with Tracey and Blaise, in the process making his robe billow furiously behind him that would have made

Snape proud. Sadly, Harry never noticed his robes and would not be able to comment on them. He had more pressing matters to attend to: namely, plotting revenge on the man who just moved himself into number four on Harry's list.

"Harry?" Tracey asked questioningly, placing her hand on Harry's arm again to calm him.

"Professor Lockhart," Harry began scathingly, "is in for the longest year of his worthless life."

Chapter 11: Acting the Part

The next day brought on Herbology with the Ravenclaws. It really wasn't that bad of a class. Professor Sprout was a kind teacher, and she had moved them into Greenhouse three, which housed the far more interesting and dangerous plants. She looked positively furious today though, and Harry wondered why. When he passed by her, he couldn't help but overhear her muttering.

"Thinking he knows more about plants... as if I haven't been teaching Herbology for twenty years: the nerve of that man. And then he smiles as if I'm a child..." she muttered darkly, staring at her dirt covered hands and looking as if she wanted nothing more than to wring the man's neck (whom Harry believed to be Lockhart). Harry couldn't help but sympathize; he was about to offer to help bury the body in Greenhouse seven before changing his mind.

"Run in with Lockhart?" asked Harry knowledgeably.

Professor Sprout shook herself out of her reverie and glanced at Harry. In an uncharacteristic move, she ruffled his hair slightly and allowed a small smile to grace her lips. "You could say that, Mr. Potter. Go on and get to a table then, the lesson is about to start."

Harry went with Blaise and Tracey, leaving Lily and Daphne to partner together with two other Ravenclaws. Terry Boot walked over and joined them at their own table, nodding curtly.

"Boot," nodded Harry and Blaise respectively.

"Now everyone, there are four earmuffs at each table, if you'll each grab a pair—" No sooner had she said that everyone dove to ensure they weren't stuck holding the fluffy pink ones. There was one such pair at Harry's table, and he had been trying to catch Daphne's attention to ask her something, leaving a smirking Tracey holding out the pink earmuffs for Harry to wear. He groaned and put them on reluctantly. He left one ear open for hearing though. Professor Sprout, wearing a pink set of her own, beamed at him before continuing with her lesson.

"Now class, we'll be repotting Mandrakes today. Does anyone know the properties of the Mandrake?"

An Indian looking girl raised her hand. "Yes, Miss Patil?"

"The Mandrake is known to be used in restorative draughts, helping to cure people who are in an unnatural state, cursed or otherwise."

"That is correct, take ten points to Ravenclaw." The Slytherins didn't scowl, as they typically did whenever Hufflepuffs or especially Gryffindors earned points.

"I'm surprised no one seems angry that the Ravensclaws got points," commented Harry.

"There's a mutual respect between the two houses. After all, knowledge is power," answered Tracey.

"Well aren't you a fountain of knowledge," Harry said sarcastically.

"Beauty too," retorted Tracey with a flick of her hair, knocking it into Harry's mouth and causing him to sputter.

"What do you think, Mr. Potter?"

"Err– I'm sorry Professor, I couldn't quite hear you through the earmuffs. Could you repeat that?"

"Why are the mandrakes dangerous?"

Harry thought furiously. Herbology wasn't his strong point, and any future memories he had weren't exactly helpful. He tried to think rationally; why did they need earmuffs? To prevent them from hearing...

"Their cry is– fatal– isn't it?"

"Are you asking me or telling me, Mr. Potter?"

"Their cry is fatal ma'am. That's why we have the earmuffs," Harry said confidently.

"And a lovely pair you have too," whispered Blaise. Harry glared.

"Five points to Slytherin, Mr. Potter. That is correct. Now, the mandrakes we are working with today are still quite young, therefore

their cries won't kill you, but they may knock you out for a few hours. So make sure not to neglect your earmuffs. I will show you how to repot them now. Everyone's earmuffs on?" The class gave her a thumbs up. She pulled back her sleeves and grabbed a tufty looking plant in one of the nearby trays. She pulled on the purplish green monstrosity as hard as she could and revealed what was there.

Harry gasped. A baby with looks only a mother could love came out of the pot, rather than the normal roots Harry had been expecting. It had leaves growing out of its head, had skin tinged a light green, making it seem pale. Harry suddenly wondered if it needed sun and let out a laugh that no one heard. They also were unable to hear the baby Mandrake, clearly bawling at the top of its lungs.

Sprout grabbed another large plant pot and stuffed the hideous creature into it, burying the thing in dark, damp compost until all that could be seen were the leaves sticking up from its head. She dusted off her hands, wiped the sweat off her brow, and then removed her earmuffs. The class followed suit.

"Go on then, each table get a plant and do as I did. The compost is in the sacks over there. And beware the Venemous Tentacula, it's teething." Harry noticed a strange feeler making its way around Professor Sprout's shoulder. It was swiftly slapped by her and the spiky, dark red plant drew back into itself, thoroughly chastened.

The group grabbed the necessary supplies and Harry was given the task of uprooting the Mandrake. Tracey said, "Your earmuffs are the best ones." At least, that's what it looked like she said; Harry wasn't sure how good his lip-reading abilities were.

So he fought with the Mandrake for about five minutes, dragging it out of the pot before dropping it unceremoniously into the new pot and the four of them buried it.

"So have you guys had Lockhart yet?" asked Boot.

"No, thankfully, although I'm dreading it," said Harry.

"Really? I heard from one of the Hufflepuffs that he's brilliant."

"His teeth maybe," Harry said. Blaise snorted. "We owe that guy some payback? Right, Blaise?"

"Yeah," Blaise said distractedly. He was working on the next Mandrake.

By the end of the class Harry was sweating profusely and was merely thankful that he didn't have another class immediately after. The Slytherins headed back to the dungeons to wash off and do homework. When that was finished, Harry played some chess—losing soundly to Blaise repeatedly— and just lounged around until dinner time. He went upstairs and grabbed a sack full of galleons just in case he needed it. There were easily five hundred galleons in there. Once they were done eating, Harry began to put some plans into action.

"Be back guys," he said, and Harry left on the way to find a pair of dangerous, but brilliant, pranksters.

He headed to the Gryffindor common room, and found Neville Longbottom pacing outside the Fat Lady.

"Oh excellent do you know the pass— Potter?"

"Longbottom," regarded Harry casually. The boy was a bit shy and lacking in the confidence department, but seemed normal enough from a cursory glance.

"Wh—what are you doing here?"

"Looking for the Weasley twins. I'd ask you to go get them but..." Harry trailed off with a smirk. Neville blushed, bright red.

"Ca-can I ask you a q-question?"

"You already did," pointed out Harry.

"Oh."

"Go on then, Longbottom; that was a joke. What did you want to ask? I may not answer, mind, but I'll at least listen."

"Why are you in Slytherin?" he blurted out.

"My guess is because the hat said Slytherin, but then I could be wrong." Harry laughed at the Gryffindor's face. "Ah, honestly? Bit of a long story." Harry thought back and remembered when the future souls entered Harry's body right before he was sorted. Harry had wondered if he would still have been a Slytherin had his future self and Voldemort's soul not entered his body at that point. Harry had settled in though and was gradually getting used to Slytherin. He'd grown closer to his friends, become more relaxed, and cemented a spot in the unofficial Slytherin hierarchy. Being Harry Potter had its advantages at times.

Longbottom started to speak again but someone else walked towards them and Longbottom's courage failed him.

The savior walked into the light moments later and Harry had to stifle a groan. Of all the Gryffindors in Hogwarts it had to be Creevey. Must be something about Potter luck...

"All right, Neville? And— Harry!" Creevey's eyes bugged out of his sockets. Harry sighed, his hand twitching next to his wand, just itching to curse the annoying little pipsqueak. Creevey's hand twitched as well, though it was probably reaching for his bloody camera.

"Would you mind getting the twins, Longbottom?"

"I'll get them, Harry," exclaimed Creevey ecstatically. Harry merely waved his hand, not bothering to stop him. Creevey spoke the password and he and Neville entered the common room, leaving Harry to await the pair of conspirators.

Harry was not left outside for long as two identical redheads wearing two identical grins stepped out of the portrait hole.

"Messrs. Weasley and Weasley," greeted Harry cordially. "May I enquire as to how you're finding this day?" They each extended a hand so Harry crossed his own and shook them both simultaneously. Their grins increased.

"It is absolutely splendid—"

"Quite spiffing really—"

"So good of you to ask, old chap—"

"Lovely weather were having—"

"Really marvelous—"

"Really really marvelous—"

"Enough," Harry said, exasperated. The twins grinned— or had they never stopped?

"What can we help you with, dear Mr. Potter?"

"We are in your debt from discovering the location of the snake's lair."

"About that," Harry began, "that prank really wasn't that great. I had heard you all were legends in the making, and then the prank I see really fell short of my expectations." The grins finally faded. "That's not the point though— the point is I need a charm that turns something yellow, a kind of faded, grimy yellow. And do you know a glamour charm to change say your hair, possibly making you bald?"

"We have a hair-loss potion."

"Right-ho George, my good man. As for the charm, we taught one to ickle Ronniekins—"

"Sunshine daisies butter mellow, turn this stupid bloke's teeth yellow."

"Do you really expect me to believe that?" Harry asked with a grin of his own.

"No, not really. It was a good rhyme though," defended Fred.

"That it was, Fred. You can always take comfort in that. You'll know that you almost achieved greatness. Just like George almost made a move on the Quidditch Chaser I saw him eyeing the other day." Harry smirked when George began to sputter incoherently. Fred thumped him on the back and the twins stared at Harry with slight respect in their eyes.

"You fight well in a battle of wits, young Harrikins." The twins looked at each other, nodded once, and before Harry could move each of them grabbed him by an armpit and carried him to an empty classroom nearby.

"Now we'll get you the potion tomorrow night—"

"No good," Harry cut off. "I need it tonight, and how long is the incubation period before it works?"

"Well we can make it where it's dormant until a certain spell is cast."

"Excellent. Make it so it reacts to the color changing spell, but waits exactly two minutes before going into effect. Can you handle that?"

"Can you handle that, he asks us," stated Fred incredulously.

"Harry my boy," boomed George. "You're talking to the Weasley twins."

"There is no mischief too difficult—" George stated.

"No prank inconceivable—" chimed in Fred.

"No target unprankable—" continued George.

"And no prank war ever lost—" added Fred.

"For the legendary Weasley Twins!" the two finished together with a flourish. A subtle flick of Fred's wand made fireworks crack up behind them and they were cast in an illuminating light.

"We'll have it ready for breakfast time. Meet us outside the Great Hall."

"Perfect. The only thing you may regret is not seeing the immediate results. What about the color-changing spell?"

"The incantation is novo followed by the color you want to use. The color has to be in Greek for some reason though. Yellow is kitrinos. We've used that one before. The wand movement is just like you're tracing out a word. Do that for as long as it takes to finish the incantation then whip the wand back across. The more power you

put into the spell the brighter it is. So a faded yellow, don't use too much magic and you should get your results."

"Easy enough. Thank you, gentlemen. May your pranks be successful and your records unblemished."

"A true prankster!" cried Fred and George. They shook Harry's hands warmly and walked out with smiles on their faces. Harry shook his head and headed back to the dungeons, eager to humiliate Lockhart on day one. The only problem was he didn't expect to run into Lockhart on day zero, as it were.

"Harry, Harry, Harry," Lockhart chanted. In spite of himself, Harry wondered how Lockhart managed to show every single bloody tooth whenever he opened his mouth.

"Isn't it past curfew?" Lockhart asked with his patronizing smile. Harry felt like asking Lockhart if it was past his bedtime as well. He only just managed to stop himself. Only just.

"I don't recall it being past curfew last I checked."

"Lucky for you I have an accurate watch then," beamed Lockhart. "Best be off or I'll have to give you a detention."

"What?" asked Harry, dumbfounded.

"Go on then, I'll pretend I haven't seen you."

"How thick can you get..." muttered Harry.

"Actually, Harry, I meant to talk to you about those signed photos you were giving out." Harry groaned.

Lockhart returned and swept him under his arm and led him back towards the dungeons. Harry was about to curse him when he decided he'd play nice for the moment.

"I know that I'm the only one here to blame, after all I got you on the front page. But signed photos, really. You're not quite at that stage in your career just yet. Now, someday perhaps you may have to carry them with you wherever you go, but for now you'll only appear bigheaded. You have that business with You-Know-Who that's

working for you, better than I was at your age. Now I know what you're thinking, 'but he's won Witch Weekly's Most Charming Smile Award five years running.' Your fame isn't quite as good as that, but it's a start. It's a start," he repeated smiling conspiratorially at Harry, as if he'd let him in on a major secret. "Now I don't want to hear anymore of this signed photos nonsense. You're not quite there yet, young man," Lockhart playfully scolded, shaking his finger at Harry with a smile on his face. Harry wondered belatedly if he should be scared for his virtue.

The only reason Harry was smiling and nodding at Lockhart's words was because he was imagining what curses he wanted to try on the golden haired fraud. He was just going into vivid detail with vanishing the man's teeth from his mouth and was grinning slightly sadistically. Lockhart mistook it for thanks.

"Think nothing of it, always glad to help out a fellow celebrity. Don't let that get to your head though, Harry; plenty of time for that when you're older."

Harry didn't trust himself to speak. Any words that would come out of his mouth were more likely to be curses, and some of them potentially lethal. So he merely nodded. Lockhart gave him a hearty wink and strode off. Harry headed the rest of the way to the dungeons and began practicing the color-changing spell. After about an hour, he smiled in satisfaction, liking the color he had produced. It was a very dull and faded yellow. It looked mildly disgusting. Harry was pleased with the results and went to sleep, anxiously awaiting his meeting with the twins in the morning.

The next morning took far too long to arrive, in Harry's humble opinion. He couldn't sleep and was dragging his way downstairs. He met up with the Weasley twins early by the Great Hall, grabbed the potion, and headed down to the kitchens. He swiftly tickled the pear and grabbed the door handle, letting himself be confronted by the house elves. A rather energetic female approached him quickly, smiling happily at him.

"How can we be helping Master Sir today?"

"The name's Harry. Yours?"

"I is being Blinky, Master Harry."

"Pleasure to meet you, Blinky. Listen, Professor Lockhart asked me to give this to you to put in his goblet for breakfast. Would you mind mixing it with his Coffee?"

The house elf regarded Harry suspiciously, but thankfully Harry had long mastered the art of appearing innocent. A sharp look from the elf reminded Harry he would need to talk to Daphne some more about Occlumency before the elf began chatting away happily to her fellow house elves. One of them walked over to the table that represented the Head Table and poured it into the goblet at Lockhart's place at the table. Harry thanked them warmly, and after being pressed with a couple biscuits, promised to come back and visit.

He whistled softly as he headed to the Great Hall and sat next to Blaise.

"Phase one of plan Utterly Destroy and Humiliate Lockhart is underway.

"You really need to think up some better plan names," muttered Blaise. "What are you going to do?"

"Can't say. Although it isn't going to be me who's doing it. The less you know the better. Plausible deniability and all. Because you're going to be my distraction. I don't want you getting busted, or worse getting me busted," Harry said, acting the part of a true Slytherin.

"Wait a minute... I didn't volunteer to be your distraction."

"Sure you did."

"When? I would have remembered this."

"In Herbology. I said we owe him payback. Then I said right, Blaise? You said yeah. Therefore, you volunteered to be my distraction."

"I don't like your logic."

"I'm not asking you to like it."

Blaise glared. "This better be worth it," he said finally.

"Oh it will be," smirked Harry. "It will be."

Harry turned his attention to the Head Table as he watched Lockhart down his coffee. Harry grinned in satisfaction.

"Alright then," Harry began, rubbing his palms together in anticipation. "We have Lockhart's class, followed by Potions right?"

"Wow Harry, you learned you're schedule. Pretty soon you'll be able to tell the days of the week," chimed in Lily, who had just sat down. Harry spared her a look that basically said whatever before turning his attention to more important issues.

"Ok, Blaise," Harry whispered. "When I drop my quill, that's the sign for you to distract him. Just catch his attention and ask him about something from his book. Doesn't matter what. He'll smile real big and start talking. That's all I need you to do."

Blaise nodded grimly. "Ok then. Let's do it."

The two of them stood up from the table, bid goodbye to Lily and Tracey, who had just joined them, and headed towards the common room to grab their books for class. They passed Daphne and Astoria on the way out of the Great Hall and Harry smiled brightly at them. Daphne's sister really did make her act differently. It was really funny. She became more flustered each time they saw her it seemed like. So much for Occlumency.

"I just thought of something," Blaise said as they were walking back to the dungeons. Harry waited for Blaise to continue. Blaise still didn't say anything so Harry decided he needed a prompt.

"Well?"

"Right," Blaise said. "Lily's going to be furious with you if she finds out you had anything to do with... ummm... whatever it is you're doing. She likes Lockhart. Thinks he's brilliant. So, just make sure she doesn't know. I wouldn't want to face her wrath. She's worse than a redhead when it comes to her temper."

"I'll keep that in mind," Harry replied seriously.

They headed to their Defense Class, fully prepared to wreak havoc, but the sight that met them was complete chaos. The classroom was a disaster area. It looked like a herd of Hippogriffs had trampled through the room and made sure to hit everything at least twice.

"What in Merlin happened here?"

Harry and Blaise turned around, meeting Lily's curious face. Tracey followed in behind her.

"Gryffindors," Tracey said, as if that explained everything. Funnily enough, it did.

The other Slytherins trickled in and they all wisely stayed in the back of the room, where the damage was least noticeable. Harry and Blaise had begun banishing objects to the other side of the room to clear a space to sit in. Daphne soon joined in.

"Good morning class," called Lockhart, striding confidently from his quarters, smiling brightly at his students.

"Professor, what happened here?" asked Lily sweetly. Lockhart ate it up; although Harry couldn't tell if she was serious or not. He wasn't used to hearing Lily using a pleasant, non-sarcastic tone of voice.

"Ah, the Gryffindors in your year aren't exactly up to scratch. I was expecting them to handle something simple but they weren't. I forget sometimes that everyone isn't as brilliant as I am," he said with a shake of his head. "Ah, but where are my manners?" he flashed another disarming smile. Harry couldn't wait to nail him with the prank. His hand was itching to pull his wand. But he had to be patient. "I am Gilderoy Lockhart, Order of Merlin, Third Class—"

"Because he's a Third Class wizard," muttered Harry. Blaise turned his laugh into a hacking cough surprisingly quickly.

"—Honorary Member of the Dark Force Defense League—" continued Lockhart, oblivious to Harry's commentary.

"Only honorary, because honestly, who would actually want to be saved by that man? I doubt he could cast a protego to save his hair," continued Harry viciously. Tracey shook silently in mirth, while

Daphne let a small smile break across her face. Lily's shoulders tensed. But she still said nothing.

"—And five-time winner of Witch Weekly's Most-Charming Smile Award— but I don't talk about that—"

"And here I thought he was talking about it right now. Foolish me," muttered Harry, shaking his head at his own imagined stupidity. "Honestly that's all he ever does talk about."

Blaise and Tracey both let out a laugh. Lockhart smiled radiantly at them. Apparently he had said some sort of joke and thought they were reacting to it.

"I see you've all bought a complete set of my books—"

"Not me," Blaise whispered defiantly.

"Well done. I was thinking we'd have a short quiz to see how well you've read them." Lockhart passed out the quiz to everyone and told them they had half an hour.

Harry snorted derisively when he read the first question: 1. what is Gilderoy Lockhart's favorite color? The quiz continued with much of the same. Harry was going to enjoy answering these questions.

The first answer would be faded, grimy yellow. Of that, Harry was certain. 2. What is Gilderoy Lockhart's secret ambition?

Harry began remembering some of his future memories of Lockhart and his feelings of hatred intensified. He tried to memory charm his future counterpart. Oh, the man would pay for the evils he would possibly eventually commit. Harry ignored his skewed sense of logic and delved further into the joke that was a quiz.

His next answer was to market his own hair-care products, before scratching that out. He already knew that was true. No, Harry needed a far more twisted answer. He settled on: corrupting little boys. In what way, Harry would leave up to the professor. When Harry wrote that down, every smile Lockhart made was called into question.

He fled to the refuge of question three: What, in your opinion, is Gilderoy Lockhart's greatest achievement to date?

An easy one, thought Harry. Fooling the Wizarding World into believing he's capable of doing what he says he did in his fiction novels.

Harry's answers became considerably more vulgar and irreverent, but they all held at least an ounce of truth. For example, question twenty-seven, what does Gilderoy Lockhart use in his hair, Harry's answer was well-crafted, worthy of a Slytherin on a vendetta. His answer: A creamy, white liquid to smooth his hair down, known by many Muggles as shampoo.

Another excellent answer was to question thirty-seven: what is Gilderoy Lockhart's least favorite potion. That was so simple: veritaserum.

The best answer though was definitely to number fifty-one. What is Gilderoy Lockhart's favorite thing to do?

Harry had written down various answers to choose from, such as lie, charm people's memories, smile like a pedophile (which rhymed spectacularly), and discuss the trials and tribulations of celebrities. Harry finally settled on a most ingenious answer: talk about Gilderoy Lockhart.

He turned in his quiz with a feral grin and waited for Lockhart to go over them.

"Most of you all need to read the collective works of Gilderoy Lockhart more closely. I clearly state in chapter five of Year with the Yeti that my favorite color is lilac." He continued flipping through the quizzes. "Also, my secret ambition is to rid the world of all evil and market my own line of hair care products—"

"I knew it," muttered Harry. Harry knew Lockhart was reading his quiz when the git's face paled dramatically. Harry wondered which question he was on. Harry decided now was the time to curse the fraud. Harry dropped his quill delicately.

"Professor Lockhart, in Talking with Trolls, what did you say about your favorite pastime?"

"Mr.—?"

"Zabini." Harry pulled out his wand and intoned *no vo kitrinos*, waving his wand as if he was tracing out a word in the air.

"Mr. Zabini, first of all it's *Travels with Trolls*," began Lockhart with a grin, just as Harry finished the spell, "and second of all I state in *cha—*"

"Professor, your teeth!" shrieked Lily. Harry repressed a laugh.

"Yes, they are beautiful aren't they?" asked Lockhart, oblivious as usual to the true meanings of his students' words. "Five time winner of *Witch Weekly's Most Charming Smile Award*," he grinned again, showing off his disgustingly yellow and seemingly plaque covered teeth. Harry smiled maliciously. Blaise choked back a laugh and began having a coughing fit.

"They're yellow!" exclaimed Tracey, causing the laughter to break the dam that had been holding it.

"Yellow?" repeated Lockhart blankly. He gained a glazed over look for a moment, then rubbed earwax out of his ears. "Surely I didn't hear you right, Miss—"

"Davis," prompted Tracey. Lockhart pulled out a pocket mirror—Harry wasn't surprised he had one, and gasped in horror.

"My teeth..." he said quietly. Suddenly, his hair, one of his prized attributes, fell all around him. It landed on the floor, in his shirt, on his shoes, and covered the mirror. Lockhart looked up in irritation, wondering what had fallen on him. He brushed the hair off the mirror and stared at it as it lay in his hands. He held the mirror up to his face and gave the highest shriek Harry had ever heard. He swore his glasses cracked slightly.

"My hair..." moaned Lockhart. "My beautiful, beautiful hair," he murmured, stroking the strands softly. He ran up to his quarters, falling twice on the way, the portraits along the wall, which Harry noticed were all of Lockhart as well, gave yells of disgust as their real life counterpart fled past them.

"Class dismissed," he called over his shoulder without breaking stride.

Harry and Blaise walked out together, snickering. "Wow, that was a—" Harry quickly put his hand near his throat, palm down, and started moving it from side to side, trying to shut Blaise up— "brilliant prank, Harry."

An inhuman screech met Harry's ears. "Oh crap," Harry muttered. "Gotta go!" He ran as fast as he could from the screaming blond haired banshee that was Lily Moon.

"That was you, Potter?" she shrieked. "How dare you do that to him! Oh you're gonna get it, Potter. Wait until I get my hands on you. You're lucky my twin brothers graduated!" Lily ran a lot faster than Harry had ever expected her to and he turned the corner somewhere and quickly opened a door before closing it behind him.

Belatedly, Harry realized in the room with him was the cabinet he and Blaise had fallen out of. He decided to go back inside and he found himself once again in Borgin and Burkes near the entrance to Knockturn Alley. Harry decided it would be a good idea to buy the cabinet, who knew when it could come in handy?

Harry stood up and dusted himself off, then slowly approached the counter, quickly hiding his Hogwarts robes. He pulled his hair low over his scar and addressed Mr. Borgin.

"How much are you selling this black and gold cabinet for?" Harry asked in a gruff voice, pointing to it to gain the old man's attention.

"More than you have you runt, get out of here."

"I can assure you I have adequate funds," Harry retorted coldly. "Name your price, Borgin. And think carefully before you do. I will be, displeased if you do not meet the price I have given the cabinet already."

Borgin didn't react to the subtle threat, not that Harry had expected him to. After all, he still looked like a scrawny kid. Borgin took far too long to answer, so Harry made the decision for him.

"We both know how much you'll take for it, so why don't I just save you the trouble." As Harry continued to speak, letting some of Voldemort's memories of dealing with the man come to the surface, he watched as Borgin began to pale considerably. Harry's eyes also began to flash red, as Borgin began to bring out some of the Voldemort in him.

Harry pulled out the sack of galleons he had in his pocket and gave Borgin four hundred of them.

"There, I will give you four hundred galleons and will spare your life. Be grateful, Borgin." Harry walked over to the cabinet, shrunk it down, pocketed it, and left the store, leaving a speechless and frightened Borgin. "The Dark Lord is back..." he whispered harshly.

Harry entered the Leaky Cauldron, flooed to the Three Broomsticks, and swiftly returned to Hogwarts via the Honeydukes passage. He disillusioned himself and slipped into the basement before traveling back to the school. He ran back to the dungeons and took the other cabinet, also shrunk it down, and placed the pair of them in his trunk before casting multiple locking charms, including a blood seal which he knew how to cast for no apparent reason, before he sighed in relief.

He lay on the bed and looked around, wondering why it was so quiet. Then—

"Fuck!"

Harry ran as fast as he could to Potions class. This was not a good sign, showing up late to Snape's first class. He ran as fast as he could, turned a corner, and skidded past the classroom door before stopping and walking back into it.

"Very good of you to join us, Mr. Potter. You're eleven minutes late, so we'll make that eleven detentions."

"WHAT?" yelled Harry. "That's not fair at all!"

"Not fair?" chortled Snape. "We'll make it a round dozen then." Blaise, who was sitting in the back with an angry Lily, kicked Harry furiously to shut him up. Harry, mouth open in renewed protest,

wisely shut it and threw himself into the chair next to Tracey and instead glared at Snape with renewed hatred.

"Now that Mr. Potter has graced us with his presence, if you will continue with the assigned potion."

"What are we making?" Harry hissed at Tracey.

"Unctuous Unction."

"What?"

"No talking, Potter." Snape said, walking by their cauldron. Tracey had already started on the potion and Harry didn't have a clue how to make it. He just followed Tracey's directions as he evenly chopped the roots of the dittany plant.

"Really Longbottom, you call this an Unctuous Unction potion? Gregory the Smarmy would be incensed that you even tried to pronounce his potion. I call this a mess." A flick of Snape's wand vanished the potion and nearly reduced Longbottom to tears. Weasley started to yell in protest. Snape gleefully rounded on the redhead. Unfortunately, or fortunately in Weasley and Finnegan's case, the two of them had both been yelling and their voices mingled together so Snape couldn't discern what exactly they had been calling him. He got the gist of it though.

"We'll make that twenty points each from Gryffindor and a detention for the pair of you for that language then shall we?" Snape asked. Malfoy thumbed his nose at the Weasel, making the boy turn redder than his hair.

Tracey single-handedly finished the potion and proved she was adept at it as the orange colored potion met Snape's approval. She bottled it up and walked up to the front to turn it. Harry grabbed a vial full and stuffed it into his pocket in case the potion had useful properties.

The bell to end class couldn't have come any later. Snape was the first one out the door, surprisingly enough, and his robes billowed menacingly behind him.

"How does he do that?" asked Harry, mesmerized at the grace and power behind a billowing robe. Blaise, Tracey, Lily, and Daphne were all walking back towards the common room. Daphne had been partnered with Millicent, and managed to do a good job on her potion as well, although she wanted to trade partners. They all laughed at Harry's question, Blaise in particular, before the girls went back to their conversation.

"No idea," said Blaise. "But you did it better the other day."

"What?" exclaimed Harry. "When?"

"After you took that picture with Lockhart. You looked furious and your robe was whipping behind you like it was in a storm."

"Of course I looked furious," Harry growled menacingly. "That idiot that calls himself a teacher was earning a place on my shit list. You don't want to be on my shit list. It's a very bad place to be. Trust me. Lockhart earned himself spot number four the other day. Hey, is there any pureblood rule that allows you to duel somebody for like dirtying your family name or something like that?"

"Yeah," Blaise said, looking at Harry curiously. "It's called an honor duel. You would say for example, I, state your name, of the noble house of, state your house, challenge you, state their name, of the noble house of, state their house, to a duel to redress grievances caused to my family name. If they accept, then the challenger sets the conditions of the duel. If they decline then they lose honor to their own name for not backing up their actions or else they can choose to take it to the pureblood council to decide whether or not the actions warranted the honor duel. If the council believes the acts the offender was doing are worthy of a duel, then that person owes you something of your choosing, which must be agreed upon by the council. Otherwise, you owe them something to compensate for the unreasonable challenge, although it is of your own choosing."

"Ok," Harry said slowly. Daphne glanced at him curiously.

"Why?" Blaise asked.

"No reason," lied Harry.

"I know that look, Potter. You're up to something. Who do you reckon on dueling? Lockhart?"

"Actually, I was thinking more along the lines of—"

"Hey Potter, I bet you're going to have fun being in those detentions while I'm practicing Seeker aren't you?" called Malfoy from behind Harry.

"Malfoy," Harry muttered to Blaise.

"Duly noted," Blaise replied. Harry turned around to face his adversary.

"So how much did it cost you to get on the team, Malfoy? A couple thousand galleons? On another note though, what happened with the house-elf?"

Malfoy looked surprised at the change of topic and slipped coolly into his calm façade. "He will be willing to negotiate if he finds a replacement elf. Sometime near Christmas."

"Fair enough," replied Harry. They parted ways. Blaise was astounded at how Harry could keep Malfoy off balance.

"That still amazes me that you can do that."

"Well, Malfoy doesn't know what to think. Ever since I nicked his wand first semester and got him almost busted by Filch he hasn't known how to treat me. It's been driving him mad."

"I think a fairer statement would be that Malfoy doesn't know how to think," commented Daphne. "You should try holding an intelligent conversation with him. It's a lot harder than it looks."

"Yeah well, Malfoy needs to learn to think for himself and not say and do everything because of his father," said Harry.

"That's true, but I still don't get how you affect him so much. Actually, I don't understand why you treat him civilly."

"Well, Blaise, here's the thing. When life gives you lemons—" began Harry.

"You make lemonade," finished Blaise. "What the hell does that have to do with this? That would just mean doing what he would expect. With lemons he expects lemonade right?"

"You're on the right track, but that's not what I was going to say. If you'd let me finish," said Harry calmly. Blaise shut up quickly. Daphne looked at him curiously again.

"When life gives you lemons you make grape juice. Then you let everyone else wonder how the hell you did it."

"How very Slytherin of you, Potter," said Snape, who had overheard the last part of his conversation. Harry looked up, surprised. That sounded like a compliment. Snape always either insulted him or his parents. Actually, only his father. He never said anything about his mother... "Your father would be so ashamed," Snape finished with a sneer. Ah, there was the insult. "Your first detention begins tonight, my office, at seven. Good day."

After Snape walked away, Harry looked at his friends. "Crap," he said eloquently. Lily was about to chide him on his language but Tracey stopped her.

"Let him be," she said. "That pretty much sums up the situation nicely."

Chapter 12: Enemies of Harry, Beware

True to Snape's word, Harry had a dozen detentions to carry out. They were definitely not pleasant experiences. He showed up, cleaned out various cauldrons prepared different ingredients for potions, and all the while he endured a mind-blowing headache, for the first few days at least. Harry had the sneaking suspicion that Snape was reading his mind, all the more plausible when he thought about it. So after the second detention he began practicing Occlumency with Daphne. After a lengthy negotiation process which Harry felt he ended up on the losing end of, but it seemed important enough to just owe her two favors of anything she requested. However, she left exasperated with Harry when she realized his memories weren't very organized. So each night, Harry began to sort his memories of different people, places, classes, and the like. He left the non-magical aspect of his memories alone; it wasn't too critical of a category.

Each detention got progressively worse though. By the third detention, Harry was ready to kill himself. By the fifth detention he figured out it would be much more prudent to kill Snape. That got him through the sixth and seventh detentions, as he angrily bore Snape's ridicule while trying to clean cauldrons that were caked with grime. Whenever he got a particularly difficult one clean, Snape would drop something into it "accidentally," making it smell foul and forcing Harry to go back and fix it. Any complaints and he would be there longer as he discovered to his chagrin. The only positive thing that came out of it was Snape couldn't do it consecutively, due to "prior engagements, the likes of which are none of your concern you worthless, arrogant spawn of James Potter."

Snape was going to have it coming to him very soon. He was racking up the points on the payback Harry owed the man.

On top of that, Malfoy cemented his status on being an annoying person Harry needed to deal with the day after detention number seven. He had been on his way up to his dorm room when Flint stopped him.

"Don't bother showing up to Quidditch practice, Potter. We've got a new Seeker now: Malfoy," Flint stated.

"Don't bother trying to win the cup then," Harry fired back hotly before walking up to his room angrily. He debated the merits of trying out for Chaser. He eventually decided he wouldn't; he would wait until Malfoy royally screwed up his chances at being Seeker. Then, Harry would ride in and save the day, making the blonde git look even worse than before.

He still headed out to the pitch though, if for no other reason than to check out his competition.

Harry walked out and noticed the Gryffindors were flying on the pitch— this was about to get interesting. He sat in the stands and waited for the Slytherins to arrive.

The Gryffindor team really was a good group of Quidditch players. Harry had to give it to them. The only problem was there Seeker. Ronald Weasley had lost his chance at being a Seeker last year: the skills of his older brother Charlie obviously weren't inherited by the youngest male Weasley. So now, Wood and his Weasleys and his women were trying to train up a new Seeker: and the applicants were abysmal. Harry was forced to admit there was one player who was fairly good, but her broom was awful. If she was on a Nimbus or a Cleansweep she would probably be better than Ravenclaw's Chang.

Wood apparently agreed with Harry's assessment as he dismissed the rest and presumably told her she was their new Seeker. Harry saw the Weasley twins whoop in delight. He looked closer at the new Seeker and almost fell out of his seat. So much for the no first-years on the house team rule.

"Ginny Weasley?" he mouthed soundlessly. She turned and looked right at him, almost as if she had heard. He suddenly heard Wood bellow in outrage.

"POTTER! Trying to spy for the Slytherins are you?" Wood flew towards Harry angrily, the Weasley twins following in his wake. Ginny, Harry noticed, blushed scarlet and almost fell off her broom. Harry stifled a laugh. He turned to face Wood, knowing that he was armed with a piece of wood infused with a phoenix feather while Wood only had a charmed piece of wood currently resting between his legs. Apparently, there was a lot of wood involved here.

"Leave him be, Wood," Fred, or possibly George said. "He's not spying for the Slytherins," the other twin continued wearily.

"How do you know that, Weasley?" Wood demanded.

"Because there here in person," continued the first twin, whom Harry positively ID'd as George.

"Damn, you're right, Fred," muttered Wood. Ok, so Harry wasn't very good at telling them apart.

Harry headed down to the pitch, the Gryffindor team flying down to meet the Slytherin team approaching. Harry was eager to see this confrontation.

"What are you doing here, Flint? This is our practice time. I booked it!"

"Easy, Wood. I have special permission from Professor Snape." Wood snatched the letter from Flint and read it out loud.

"I, Severus Snape, give the Slytherin Quidditch team permission to use the pitch, owing to their need to train their new Seeker," read Wood. "You've got a new Seeker? What was wrong with Potter?"

"Nothing you need to concern yourself with. Our Seeker can still catch the snitch faster than any of you lot could anyway. Isn't that right?"

The Slytherins parted, revealing Draco Malfoy. Harry let out a snort. Not only was the entrance overly dramatic, the facts were too extravagant to be true. Well, as far as Harry was concerned.

So needless to say, Harry burst out laughing, along with half of the Gryffindor Quidditch team. Malfoy looked dangerously pale, more so than normal at least.

"My father also donated new brooms to the team." Seven shiny Nimbus Two-Thousand Ones were held by the grinning Slytherins.

"You mean your father bought seven broomsticks to secure you a spot on the team," interpreted Harry correctly. He turned to Flint. "I really hope you know what you're doing, Captain Flint. Those

brooms better help you gain a one-hundred and sixty point lead at least or you won't win a match." Malfoy glared, his eyes glittering maliciously. He reached into his robes.

"You dare, Potter?" he whispered. Everyone heard him. The two rivals stared at each other for three seconds. Harry sized Malfoy up, and then smirked.

"I dare," he said. Then he spun around and began to walk away. Malfoy pulled his wand out of his robe and shot off a curse.

Harry heard Malfoy's movement and knew what had happened. He whipped his wand out once Malfoy yelled "Expelliarmus!" Harry let go of his wand just as the spell hit him and managed to maintain his footing. He grabbed the wand again while it was still hovering in midair and, turning back around, pointed the wand at Malfoy, who was shocked that Harry was hit by the curse but still armed and standing. He was also scared because he was looking at an extremely pissed off Harry Potter.

"Alright, Malfoy, if that's how you want to play it. I, Harry James Potter of the Noble House of Potter, challenge you, Draco Lucius Malfoy, of the Noble House of Malfoy, to a duel to redress grievances committed against House Potter. Do you accept?"

All the Slytherins stared at Harry. "Snape's not going to like this..." muttered Flint.

The Gryffindors too, looked at Harry with something akin to respect in their eyes. Everyone looked at Malfoy. Harry watched the inner conflict play across the boy's face. He wasn't sure if dueling Harry was a good idea, but he couldn't lose face in front of all these people. Then, arrogance set in— Harry knew when he saw Malfoy's smirk the decision had already been made. Malfoy figured he could handle Harry in a one on one duel. He would soon find out how wrong he was.

"I, Draco Lucius Malfoy, of the Noble House of Malfoy, accept your challenge to an honor duel." Tendrils of magic flared between the two of them, sealing the deal. "Name your terms."

"No Unforgivables," stated Harry. "The duel is over when one of the combatants is incapacitated or surrenders." Draco gave a nod; no

sneer was present on his face. He obviously took pureblood customs seriously, regardless of who he was dealing with.

"When and where?" continued Draco formally.

"In the history of the school, there was once a Dueling Club. I will see if we can't restart it and have our duel be the first to be performed in the club's first meeting. We'll aim for Halloween."

Draco nodded. "And if not?"

"We will meet to find a mutually acceptable time and place."

"So mote it be," stated Draco.

"So mote it be," repeated Harry. The tendrils of magic flared again, and then retreated. Harry and Draco both left their separate ways, and the Slytherin Quidditch team followed after their new Seeker. The Gryffindors returned to the sky to practice.

Harry went to consult Blaise.

He found the dark-skinned menace talking to Tracey and approached him. To Harry's chagrin, the two cut off abruptly and an awkward moment ensued. Harry knew they had been talking about him, or at least something they didn't want him to know about.

"Hi," they all greeted awkwardly. Silence ensued.

Harry decided to ignore whatever just happened in lieu of discussing the upcoming duel against Malfoy.

"So you challenged Malfoy to an honor duel." Blaise stated. It wasn't a question. Harry was left to ponder on the swiftness of the Hogwarts rumor mill. It was so fast, it was almost like... magic.

"About that..." Harry said slowly. Blaise grinned.

"Planning on taking him down a peg or ten?"

"You could say that. I need to go brush up on some spells. I was just going to ask you how I should approach Dumbledore. I was thinking about bringing up the possibility of a Dueling Club."

"That's— not a bad idea," Blaise conceded.

"So you're really going to duel Malfoy?" asked Tracey.

Harry, getting used to the idea, smirked. "That's the plan."

"Wipe the floor with him, Harry," Tracey said fiercely. It made Harry wonder how Malfoy had incurred her wrath.

"You mean that literally, Trace?" A smirk appeared on the blonde's face that made Harry glad it wasn't directed at him or his virtue.

"If you'd like." It was all Harry would be able to get out of her.

She walked off, leaving Blaise and Harry to their own devices.

"Need help with the spells?"

"Nope," Harry replied. "I already know what I'm going to end it with."

Harry whispered something into Blaise's ear after looking both ways. Blaise's eyes widened to comical proportions.

"You're evil, Potter."

"I prefer evil genius, if it's not too much trouble."

"Actually you're just trouble," Blaise countered.

"You know," Harry said thoughtfully, "you're the second person who's told me that."

"Who was the first?" Blaise asked when it was clear Harry wasn't planning on elaborating.

"Would you believe it was Granger?"

"Always knew that girl was smart, pity she's a lion."

"Lioness, isn't it?"

"Same thing."

"How would you know, anyway? I never pictured her as the nighttime rendezvous type."

"I meant she's a Gryffindor," Blaise said quickly, slightly blushing.

"Oh, here I was talking about—" Harry found himself incapable of speech due to Blaise's spell, and resorted to glaring at his friend as he non-verbally cast the counter curse.

"That wasn't very nice," Harry said.

"Don't pout; it's unbecoming of a Head of the family." Harry renewed his glare with interest.

"I wasn't pouting; I was merely wetting my lip because it had gone dry from the chilly dungeon air."

"Now you sound like Malfoy." Harry's response was a trip jinx that sent Blaise sprawling.

Blaise scowled and picked himself off the floor.

"I guess I deserved—"

"Yes," Harry finished.

"Just be careful with Snape, he may get pissed about the whole house loyalty thing."

Harry frowned. "Good point, at least this next detention isn't in the dungeons. I'm over on the second floor, apparently some classroom was destroyed by another one of Lockhart's horrid lessons and I have to clean it."

Blaise winced in sympathy before patting Harry on the back. "Good luck with that."

They headed back to the dorms and Harry began mentally sorting through his catalogue of spells. He went into his Occlumency state and entered the door leading to the Hogwarts layout.

His mind was becoming sorted, memory by memory, and Harry had begun to find some memories of Voldemort's that had slipped out, such as the one of Borgin. He looked through to see if he knew of any spells Voldemort had learned, but it was not the case. He did have a fairly deep repertoire from his own future self, and Harry was itching to use some of the spells on Malfoy. He had uncovered three spells from Voldemort's arsenal, in addition to over thirty that his future self knew.

One from his future self, levicorpus, which Harry was intent on using, would grab Malfoy by the ankle and hoist him into the air. He'd used that once before, last year. One of Voldemort's spells, caecus, would cause blindness in his opponent and could only be cured with a potion, a spell that could come in handy. Another excellent one he learned from Voldemort was somnio verus, or the illusion charm. It would create an illusion of the caster's choosing that seemed real to the person affected by the charm until they managed to overcome it, through force of mind or by recognizing and countering the charm. Harry practiced it for almost six hours until he was sure he could make something appear. His magic wasn't as good when he was thinking about it. Harry was looking forward to using that one though, if he could nail it.

The final spell gained from Voldemort was one that he did not yet know the incantation for, only the results. It was pissing Harry off to no end. It was the robe billowing charm. Harry saw Voldemort cast the charm on himself, making his robes billow out impressively, then sigh and remove the spell. Voldemort, while making his robes look impressive, really couldn't pull off the robe billowing look. He knew it too, but Harry couldn't figure out the thrice damned incantation. Snape did it naturally, the bastard. Harry knew because he had cast a finite and the damn robes still looked good. It was the git's only redeeming quality, and Harry would one day be willing to spare his life in exchange for the knowledge to make his robes do that. It just looked so cool. Not that he would ever admit that to Snape, even on pain of death.

Harry had been examining his robes in the mirror when Blaise walked in.

"Harry?" he asked incredulously.

"Who were you expecting?"

"Isn't your eleventh detention with Snape today?" Harry was gone before Blaise finished the sentence and he would have been thoroughly pissed off to discover his robes had, in fact, been billowing on his way out. It was like accidental magic, he couldn't consciously do it, but it happened from time to time. It would have driven the poor boy mad, but thankfully he didn't have the time to notice.

He sprinted as fast as he could, glanced at his watch every so often and cursed frequently.

Harry began to think he was hearing things; he heard a cold, murderous voice almost whispering: rip... tear... kill... He turned another corner, trying to keep from being late, when he heard the voice again, seemingly coming from the wall. "I smell blood..." Harry almost fell in shock and realized it was coming from the direction he was running towards.

"I SMELL BLOOD!" Harry got a funny feeling in his stomach; it sounded like the voice was going to kill someone. Harry cursed loudly when he turned a corner and planted his foot on a puddle of water. Harry slipped and skidded for almost six meters before crashing into a suit of armor, bringing it toppling down with him, and flipping over, landing face first on the wet floor. Snape came out cursing at Harry's loud entrance and was prepared to berate him when he looked at a spot somewhere above Harry's current position and paled. Harry didn't know Snape could turn any paler but he was proven wrong. He bodily grabbed Harry from the floor and looked him in the eye. Harry was surprised to discover he wasn't using Legilimency.

"What did you do, Potter?" he asked, his voice dangerously quiet. It was barely a whisper, and the words seemed to develop a chill as they passed from Snape's mouth to Harry's ear. He shivered almost imperceptibly and glared at his hated Professor.

"I've done a lot of things, Snape. You're going to have to be more specific." Harry refused to let Snape win this one. He was surprised when Snape spun him around and he almost yelled in surprise—

Dangling by her tail in front of him was the seemingly lifeless body of Mrs. Norris. Her eyes looked frightened, as if she had just been

kicked by an invisible person, but that wasn't all that drew Harry's attention. Above her, written in blood, were chilling words:

THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS HAS BEEN OPENED. ENEMIES OF HARRY, BEWARE.

Harry did a double take; he thought he saw his own name flashing up there in blood. Then he looked again, and the words that were there said: ENEMIES OF THE HEIR, BEWARE. Harry breathed a sigh of relief. Snape was still staring at Harry in utter loathing and undisguised hatred.

"What is the meaning of this, Potter? I know you had something to do with this."

Harry knew it didn't matter whether or not he did have something to do with it. Snape would always assume he was somehow responsible. Of course, Harry didn't realize he was indirectly responsible at the moment, and plausible deniability was a highly coveted state of mind.

"You can't prove anything, Snape," Harry denied vehemently. "Even if I did do something, which I didn't," Harry added, feeling it prudent to add his proclamation of innocence.

"We'll see about this, Potter. We're going to the Headmaster." Snape pulled his wand out, turned Harry around roughly, and muttered an incantation. Harry dodged and looked back at Snape, but he hadn't been cursing Harry. Something silvery had flown out of his wand and vanished through the wall before Harry could figure out what it was.

It was obviously some form of communication though because moments later Dumbledore appeared faster than a man his age should be capable of. In his wake walked a wary Professor McGonagall and a thoroughly bewildered Argus Filch. He glared at Harry, who returned it with interest. Filch did not like Harry's knack for avoiding trouble. Harry had a sneaking suspicion that Snape hired the caretaker to find Harry while he was "up to no good," in an attempt to rationalize his impending expulsion.

Filch's glare turned into tears. Harry realized he had seen the Hell-spawned demon bitch, Mrs. Norris, was strung up and stiff as a board.

"You," he said quietly, shaking in rage. Had the situation not been so dire, Harry would have found Filch's predicament slightly comical. The squib wouldn't be able to do a thing to Harry.

Harry forgot there are other ways to attack people than with a wand though, and was painfully reminded of that fact when Filch lunged at him. Snape seemed content to let him suffer through the beating but McGonagall managed to pull the distraught Filch off of him.

"Get off of me you madman!" Harry recollected his wits and glared darkly at Filch. How dare he accost Harry with no evidence!

"I'll have you in the dungeons with my handcuffs chained to the ceiling!" Harry was once again scared for his virtue. "I'll have you expelled for what you did to my cat!" His eyes gleamed sadistically and Harry half expected him to rub his palms together and cackle in glee, before walking away with his back hunched. Filch did nothing of the sort, and turned to his cat. Dumbledore had been casting diagnostic spells on it when Lockhart showed up, beaming.

"What's the matter here?" he asked pleasantly. Lockhart (who was currently wearing a wig, apparently the Weasley's knew how to brew a damn good potion; he would have to compliment them) noticed the grim expressions and expected them to brighten at his mere presence. Then he saw the cat.

"Ah, the poor cat. That looks like such a painful curse that must have killed her—" Filch wailed. Harry couldn't find it in himself to pity the bastard who had just attacked him. "I believe it must have been the Transmogrifian Torture curse. Pity I wasn't here, I know the exact counter curse that could have saved her."

Filch continued to sob, his body shaking in convulsions. Harry was finding it harder to hold his grudge. Had someone killed Hedwig he would probably be pretty pissed too. But he wouldn't have jumped at the slightest suspicion. He would have waited, collected evidence, planned, and then exacted his vengeance. Revenge is a dish best served cold after all. And speaking of revenge... Snape had his coming. Harry just needed to discover Snape's favorite chocolate—

"She's not dead, Argus," proclaimed Dumbledore as he stood up, straightening his robes.

"Not dead?" croaked Filch. "Why is she all— cold and stiff then?"

"She is merely petrified," answered Dumbledore gravely. ("I thought so!" cried Lockhart.) Irritated, Harry quietly summoned his wig. He squeaked and ran into his nearby classroom. He noticed McGonagall smile, but it was an almost imperceptible twitch of her upper lip. For her though, that was like rolling on the floor laughing, or rofl, as the people who pass notes in class had shortened it to.

"How though, I cannot say."

"Ask him!" Filch declared, accusing Harry.

Snape nodded in agreement, "I found him at the scene of the crime, Headmaster."

"No mere second year could have done this—"

"You would be surprised, the depths of magic Potter is capable of." Had Harry not known Snape was trying to get him expelled, he would have been surprised that Snape was complimenting him.

"I don't believe Harry here is capable of dark magic this advanced, Severus—"

"He was capable of defeating the Dark Lord—"

"I never touched Mrs. Norris!" Harry said loudly, fed up with the adults arguing about his innocence. "And I'm right here, Snape. Aren't you supposed to have my best interests in sight as my Head of House?"

"I must agree with Mr. Potter, Severus. There's really no evidence that Potter has done anything wrong," McGonagall said sharply. Lockhart returned at this point, a new wig on his head and a flicker of surprise passing through his features before it settled.

"I want to see punishment, Professor! My cat was petrified!"

"I assure you, Argus, when the culprit is found, punishment will be given. But until then, he is innocent until proven guilty," Dumbledore stated, ending as he stared into Harry's eyes. He felt the smallest touch of Legilimency before the headmaster quickly pulled away. "We will be able to cure her. Professor Sprout has some very healthy Mandrakes she is currently working with, we can have the potion made to revive Mrs. Norris in due time."

"I'll make it," butted in Lockhart. "I must have done the Mandrake Restoration potion a dozen times—" For once Snape's icy glare turned to Lockhart. The wig fell off from the sheer intensity of Snape's gaze, as if it wanted to flee from the potions master as well.

"I believe I am the Potions Master at this school, so that duty will fall to my qualified hands," sneered Snape. Lockhart's courage failed him— and he didn't notice the wig was gone.

"You may go," Dumbledore said to Harry; Lockhart took that as his cue to turn tail and flee as well: the coward.

The attack was all the school could talk about the next few days. Harry was just thankful they didn't know of his involvement. Filch was as bitter as ever, giving out detentions for people "looking happy," or "breathing loudly." Harry finally found an opportunity to approach Hermione at breakfast. She wasn't looking very well and her grades had been steadily dropping in a couple of her classes. It made Harry feel even guiltier for throwing away their friendship.

"Hermione," he began tentatively.

"Potter," she said coldly, lifting her head out of the book she was looking at to glare disdainfully at him before returning her attention to the book.

"I just— err that is— I wanted to—"

"Just say what you want or go away," she snapped. "I'm busy if you didn't notice."

"I'm sorry," Harry blurted out. "I was just bitter about not getting any post and it wasn't your fault. A ho—" Harry had the sudden thought that it wasn't a good idea to mention house elves around Hermione— for some reason he thought of the word spew— but why would that

cause him to spew? "Something," Harry modified quickly, "was blocking my mail and that's why I never responded."

"Is that all?" she sniffed.

"Do you forgive me?" She sized him up, wrote something down, looked back up at him after a moment and sized him up again.

"No," she said finally.

"Wha—" He was thrown bodily across the Great Hall, slamming into the Ravenclaw table and landing on a strange looking blonde with radishes for earrings and a curious butterbeer cork necklace. Her eyes looked wide at Harry, until he belatedly realized they were always like that. Hermione— errr, Granger that is, since she hadn't forgiven him— had returned to her book and Harry no longer existed to her. He apologized to the blonde he had landed on, who just nodded dreamily.

"You're Harry Potter," she said.

"So I've been told," Harry replied, not knowing how else to respond to that.

"I'm Luna Lovegood," she said, extending her hand after a moment. Harry shook it.

"Thanks for— breaking my fall— Luna."

"My pleasure, Harry," she said with a giggle. Harry stared.

"Right, well, I'm going to go. It was— nice to meet you?"

"Yes it was, Harry. Goodbye for now," she said cheerfully. Harry walked back to the Slytherin table rather dazed and endured a raucously laughing Blaise, at least until he managed to shove a roll in his mouth.

"That didn't exactly go how I planned it," sighed Harry.

"Obviously," muttered Lily.

"That's why you shouldn't be a prat," chirped Tracey.

"Just give it some time," Daphne said consolingly. Blaise finally extricated the roll from his mouth and continued laughing.

"Didn't know Blaise was a hyena animagus, a bloody annoying one at that," Harry commented idly. Blaise was still struggling to breathe. Although that might have been due to Harry's silent tickling charm he'd sent Blaise's way...

"So are we going to talk to Dumbledore about the dueling club?" asked Tracey.

"You said Halloween didn't you? That's a week away," pointed out Daphne.

"It is pretty close isn't it?" Harry asked. "Yeah I'll go talk to him." And with that, Harry stood up and walked over to the Head Table to speak with Dumbledore, accidentally cuffing the still laughing Blaise over the head along the way.

"Professor Dumbledore?" Harry asked hesitantly. Snape shot him a venomous glare that Harry did his best to ignore.

"What can I help you with, Mr. Potter?"

"Could I speak with you in private after dinner?" Dumbledore raised an eyebrow.

"I can free up a few minutes I suppose."

"Thank you, Professor." Dumbledore waved him off. Harry glanced warily at his potions teacher. Snape had yet to approach Harry for his final detention and hadn't had the chance to yell at him about the duel.

"This wouldn't involve the honor duel you challenged Mr. Malfoy to would it, Potter? The one that openly flaunts the first rule of Slytherin House!" finished Snape in a low hiss.

Dumbledore raised another eyebrow and McGonagall's lips thinned dangerously.

"Well, I know in the past there have been Dueling Clubs at Hogwarts, I had been hoping to see it reinstated and possibly have me and Malfoy settle our differences in an exhibition duel, to gain interest for the club of course." Harry's subtle manipulations were easily seen through.

"You know duels are not legal here at Hogwarts?" queried Dumbledore.

"Most pureblood laws and customs tend to supersede the rules of the school, Professor."

"You arrogant little—"

"Severus," warned Dumbledore. "Although you are correct, Mr. Potter, know that I am severely disappointed in your lack of judgment."

"It is such a Gryffindor-like trait, I rue the day you were sorted into my house, Potter!"

"Severus..." McGonagall warned in a vicious, cat-like hiss that had Harry nervous.

"We can at least try and make this into a controlled environment, as I'm sure I can't talk you out of it," he added hopefully. Harry shook his head.

"Alas, I suspected as much. The consequences for backing out are too high. On the bright side, Professor Lockhart had recently suggested a Dueling Club, would Halloween, before the feast of course, be acceptable?" Harry nodded, surprised that Dumbledore was letting him win this one. He looked at the headmaster suspiciously and was met with twinkling blue eyes that drove Harry mad.

"And if you could spare a moment of your time," Dumbledore motioned for Harry to follow him as he stood up and once they were out of earshot, "is there a reason why you left the school wards last month?"

Harry glanced at Dumbledore, surprised that he brought that up. Harry thought quickly, not wanting to give away the vanishing cabinets but at the same time needing a plausible excuse.

"Are you sure I left the wards, headmaster?" Dumbledore was now slightly surprised; he obviously hadn't expected Harry to deny it.

"The wards informed me that you were no longer inside them."

"Is it possible that I may have entered a room that prevents magical detection, or is not within the parameters of the wards?"

"Impossible," stated Dumbledore. "The wards were fashioned by the founders of this school, and they knew every place in the castle as they had helped build it."

"I could have been using a spell that prevents magical detection though, or entered an untraceable room."

"Show me this room then," Dumbledore prompted.

"I didn't say I did, Professor, merely that I could have."

"I had hoped you would confide in me, Mr. Potter."

"It's not a matter of confidence, Professor, but one of a mistaken identity."

And on that enigmatic note, Harry walked away, leaving a thoroughly confused headmaster in his wake.

"I'll have to talk to him alone," muttered Dumbledore, before heading to his office to grab a lemon drop and console his wounded pride.

Harry had, of course, left the school grounds unintentionally when he fell through the vanishing cabinet, but Dumbledore didn't need to know that. It felt good to keep the headmaster on his toes. There was no Legilimency involved either; Harry was making an honest man out of the headmaster. So it was with a new spring in his step that he informed Malfoy of their duel, and a grin on his face when he went to his dorm that refused to be wiped off when Snape set his last detention for Halloween during the feast.

Of course, by publicly acknowledging the duel, it invariably became the talk of the school. The Gryffindors hoped that he and Malfoy just finished each other off and were done with it. The Ravenclaws for the most part were curious about what spells would be used. Most of the Hufflepuffs didn't want anyone to get hurt, but were secretly rooting for Harry because Malfoy picked on them more. The Slytherins had split into two groups: Harry's supporters, and Malfoy's, the latter being quite larger than the former by a substantial amount.

Fred and George Weasley had begun to take bets on the upcoming duels, and Harry was five to one while Malfoy was three to one. It just made things that much more interesting.

Harry eagerly anticipated Halloween and when it finally arrived he was ready to beat Malfoy soundly. Harry, Blaise, Tracey, Lily, Daphne, and Astoria all walked together to the Great Hall for the first meeting of the Dueling Club. They were talking about the upcoming match but Harry refused to say anything other than letting a huge grin come across his face.

"Welcome everyone, gather round, so good of you to come. As you are no doubt well aware, I am Professor Lockhart and will be leading this little defense club."

Harry let out a laugh that punctuated the silence and seemed to unnerve Lockhart. He casually moved his hand to his wig.

"Professor Snape has sportingly agreed to be my assistant, claiming to know a little bit about dueling," continued Lockhart. Snape walked up on stage and smirked. Harry would be very surprised if Lockhart lived to the next day.

"After a brief demonstration, we will allow Mr. Potter and Mr. Malfoy to come up here for their exhibition duel, as it were, and then we shall break off and do some dueling on our own. How does that sound everyone?" At the mention of Harry and Malfoy, the crowd began to scream in anticipation and excitement.

"Mr. Malfoy, come up here," Snape ordered. Malfoy dutifully went up.

"Well, up you get, Harry, it looks like we'll be doing the demonstration after your duel."

Harry walked up confidently, receiving words of encouragement from his friends and a hug from Tracey, who whispered urgently into his ear.

"Make him wish he was a Hufflepuff, Harry."

The other girls also gave him quick hugs and whispered similar sentiments about Malfoy, while Astoria just squeezed the life out of him, whispered "be careful," and kissed him on the cheek. Blaise just looked at him, silently asking if Harry expected a hug as well. At Harry's cheeky grin he shoved him closer to the ring and Harry stood up to face his opponent.

"Malfoy," he greeted coolly.

"Potter," the blond returned casually.

"Well then, first we bow—" butted in Lockhart. Both boys glared at him and his courage failed.

"You aren't going to win, Potter," Malfoy sneered.

"Keep telling yourself that, Malfoy," Harry fired back. The two Slytherins bowed to each other.

"A three second countdown then," Snape said with a twisted grin on his face. Harry didn't need to use Legilimency to know what Snape was thinking: I hope that arrogant, bullying, Gryffindor finally gets what's coming to him.

"Three..." Harry and Malfoy glared at each other.

"Two..." Their wands were held loosely in their hands. Since it was an honor duel, Harry knew Malfoy wouldn't fire early because he would automatically lose.

"One..." Their wands snapped up, pointed at their enemy.

"Begin."

Neither combatant fired a spell, they both tried to judge their opponent. Malfoy had his feet firmly planted and was facing Harry at an angle, to reduce his target. Harry was on the balls of his feet,

ready to move at an instant. They both walked in a circle slowly, facing each other and waiting for the first spell to hit. Snape had apparently erected a dome to prevent spells from hitting the audience.

"Scared, Potter?"

"Just giving you a chance to try and hit me with a spell before you lose," taunted Harry.

It worked. Enraged, Malfoy fired a spell of questionable legality, it sounded like a bone-breaker curse, so Harry sidestepped it. He swiftly threw a reducto at Malfoy's feet who had to jump back from the wreckage.

"Somnio versa," Harry said quickly, and was pleased to see it connected.

The rubble cleared and Malfoy looked around for Harry. He suddenly started firing spells with a vengeance at the corner where Harry had created his double. Illusion Harry calmly walked towards Malfoy, his robes billowing in a very Snape-like manner, and just batted the spells out of the way with his hand. Malfoy's eyes widened in fear. He threw a reducto at illusion Harry's feet but the doppelganger kept walking forward, twirling the fake wand casually. He walked right up to Malfoy, who threw a cutting curse at what he thought was Harry's neck, only to see it pass through harmlessly.

Levicorpus, Harry thought, and abruptly Malfoy was hoisted by his ankle and flipped upside down into the air, his robes falling over his face. Harry cancelled the illusion spell.

"Clearly, you aren't a very good dueler, Malfoy," Harry tutted.

"Potter! You were just here, and now— now you're there! How did you do that?"

"Magic," Harry said sarcastically. Malfoy began firing spells at Harry from his predicament, so Harry cancelled the spell and let him fall to the floor. Malfoy cursed and picked himself and his dignity off the floor.

"Potter..." he growled. "You'll pay for that."

"Malfoy..." Harry began. "Clearly your last name isn't everything," he said in a Snape-like voice. The aforementioned professor consoled himself with the fact that he would have the brat for detention.

"Serpensortia!" A snake appeared out of Malfoy's wand and began to advance at Harry. Now, Harry knew he could talk to snakes, but Malfoy didn't. Harry really wasn't in the mood to reveal that ability just yet. So instead, he banished the snake at Malfoy.

"Can't fight your own battles, Draco?"

Frustrated at his lack of success, Malfoy began firing spell after spell at Harry. His anger caused his aim to become wild and sporadic, but Harry still had to dodge about five or six different curses with varying degrees of success. He managed to finally reflect one back at Malfoy, who was forced to duck and Harry summoned Malfoy's wand. He cast a protego, which blocked it, but cast a cutting curse simultaneously. Malfoy had drawn a second wand, and the curse managed to split Harry's cheek, as he hadn't been quick enough to turn.

"Looks like first blood for me, Potter," he said gleefully. Malfoy held the two wands shoulder length apart, ready for whatever Harry would try to cast.

"You're going to regret doing that, Malfoy."

Harry transfigured a stick and cast a switching spell, swapping the stick for Malfoy's primary wand.

"Since you have two wands, you won't be needing this one," growled Harry, and with an audible crack, he snapped Malfoy's hawthorn and unicorn wand in two before throwing it at Malfoy's feet. The blonde visibly cringed. He had a very pissed off Harry Potter in front of him. He also just saw his wand snapped in front of him. Harry didn't bother casting a spell. He closed the gap between him and Malfoy and slugged him right in the nose.

"Second blood for me it looks like," Harry commented. Malfoy fired a disarming charm at Harry as he fell, and Harry cursed for once again being caught off guard. The wand flew over Malfoy's head as he fell and the Seeker didn't have good enough reflexes to grab it out of

the air. Harry dove after Malfoy and grabbed the wand in his hand, urging the summoning charm to call his wand back. He threw the wand back onto the ground and caught his wand as it flew back. He towered over Malfoy and stared at him in disgust. Malfoy fired another cutting spell at him. Harry fired a spell at the same time though: "caecus."

At close range, Harry staggered from the hit and felt multiple gashes split open on his body. Malfoy screamed in pain as he lost the power of sight. Harry fell over as blood began to drain out of his body. Harry pulled himself back up to his knees and pointed his wand at Malfoy. Harry had another memory emerge and he quickly took advantage of it. He waved his wand, using a spell that induced the recipient into a coma, knocking them out for two days, often used by healers when the body needed to be shut down to heal itself. Malfoy lifted himself up and threw a curse blindly that headed right for Harry. He didn't hear the incantation but saw the rushing green light fly at him. Malfoy was hit by the spell and knocked out, making Harry the winner. The dome collapsed around him. Harry had been fast enough to beat Malfoy. But he wasn't fast enough to do anything about the curse. Harry closed his eyes and heard a female voice yell something, but he was too drained of blood to care, and the darkness enveloped him.

Chapter 13: Deceiving Appearances

When Harry finally woke up, he expected to hear the clucking of Madam Pomfrey. He was mistaken. He was somewhere in the dungeons, and when he looked up and saw the greasy hair of a certain Potions Professor, he realized he must be in Snape's personal quarters. He tried to sit up but he fell back onto the makeshift bed and groaned. Snape's attention was caught and he strode over to Harry, looking angry, as normal, and his robes billowing furiously, also as normal.

"Potter," he said sharply. Harry looked up into the calculating gaze of his Head of House.

"Where did you learn those spells?" Snape began to sift through Harry's mind with all the subtlety of a blunt axe. After a few moments Harry managed to kick him out but the strain took its toll.

"Shouldn't you be asking Malfoy that bloody question?" Harry fired back, with less vigor than he would have liked.

"I am perfectly aware of where Mr. Malfoy learned those spells. You however, I am not."

"What the hell do you mean you're per– perfectly aware?" Harry coughed out. "You mean to tell me you taught him those spells or something?" Snape's face lost any color it could have possibly had. Harry knew without a doubt that Malfoy must have been training with Snape ever since Harry challenged him to the duel. That would help explain why he was so damn powerful.

"We are not here to discuss Mr. Malfoy, Potter," he said finally, trying to change the subject and calm himself down. While teaching Malfoy those spells weren't strictly illegal...

"You know he could have killed me, Snape."

"You will address me as Professor, Professor Snape, or sir, Potter. Show your betters some respect."

"You're contra– contradicting yourself there," Harry countered feebly. He had a horrible headache from the mind raping and was still stiff from the duel. "Why am I here and not in the Hospital Wing?"

"Madame Pomfrey is busy preparing room for petrified students. Apparently, a couple of students were found petrified after this foolish duel. They seem to have been attacked hours before."

"Who were they?"

"A Muggleborn from Gryffindor, Creepy, I believe. He was found with a camera to his face, feet away from Angelina Johnson and Alicia Spinnet of Gryffindor, two of the three chasers. They were found putting on make-up. All three were petrified, and Gryffindor is calling for the expulsion of some of the Slytherins. You would do well to put this stupid and Gryffindorish duel behind you and create a united front."

"I'll keep that in mind." Harry muttered under his breath, "At least now Malfoy may have a chance of winning the Quidditch match. Don't know if that's good or bad." Snape apparently heard him.

"By the way, what was that last spell he shot at me? The green one? How did it miss me?" Snape grimaced. Obviously, he had been hoping for Harry to be hit by the spell. The animosity between the two of them was only being inflamed.

"Spell version of the Draught of Living Death," Malfoy called from his bed a few feet over that Harry hadn't noticed. At least that gave him a bit of a time table, it had been at least two days. Harry wondered if he heard his muttering.

Harry was surprised Malfoy was speaking civilly. Harry had snapped his primary wand and blinded him, after all.

"In case you were wondering, I have yet to restore Mr. Malfoy's eyesight," Snape drawled. Ah, so that was why he was playing nice. Snape seemed to look pointedly at Harry, obviously he didn't know what spell had been used.

"It requires a potion. Needs to be issued within the first forty-eight hours or the victim is permanently blind." Harry heard Malfoy give a battle yell.

"Just kidding," Harry said quickly. "It does need a potion though. The spell was caecus."

Snape nodded and Malfoy could be heard breathing in relief.

"I consider the honor to the House of Potter restored, by the way," Harry called. A flash of magic went between the two and vanished, sealing the deal. Malfoy nodded his head.

Snape left in a hurry to go make the potion.

"So Snape taught you all those dark spells huh?" Harry asked.

"You really think I'm going to answer that, Potter?"

Harry grinned. "It was worth a shot."

"Stupid Gryffindor."

"Hey! Watch it. Don't make me duel you again."

Malfoy actually laughed. Harry was having trouble reconciling this Malfoy with the previous one. Maybe he was on so many potions that he was giddy...

"So you were training ever since I challenged you."

"Yeah. Couldn't let you show me up too easily now. After all, I'm still a Malfoy."

Harry sighed. Harry was still trying to understand how he was having a rational conversation with Malfoy.

"That's good at least. I already have one scar too many." Malfoy laughed again. It sounded so foreign to his voice when it was genuine.

"So to clear things up, once we're both healed will we be back to hating each other?"

"Yeah. You did snap my wand," Malfoy pointed out, surprisingly not sounding hostile.

"Just checking. This seems too strange right now."

"Well I'm blind and you're better company than the wall at the moment, but only just."

"Pick your battles, I guess."

"Sounds like you're learning what it takes to be a Slytherin after all."

"Thanks," Harry said appreciatively. Malfoy waved at Harry's general direction, brushing it off.

"So what do you think about this Heir of Slytherin?" Malfoy asked slyly.

"I dunno. Any idea who it is?"

"Would you believe Snape thought it was you?" Malfoy asked. Harry almost fell off the bed.

"What?" Harry asked, clearly caught off guard.

"That's why I conjured the snake; he wanted to see if you were a parselmouth like Slytherin. Didn't really work out that way though," ended Malfoy somewhat bitterly.

Harry snorted. "Not really."

"Potter! You're healed. Get out of here. Mr. Malfoy, I should have the potion ready within the hour," yelled Snape. Harry pulled himself out of bed and limped towards the door.

"You sure that I'm healed—"

"Out, Potter! I have work to do. Don't complain. Be thankful I consented to heal you at all. Now leave!" Harry trudged out of the room and headed towards the Slytherin common room. He wanted to find out how the spell didn't hit him; or if it did hit him...

"Harry!" Harry's vision was obscured and his breath was constricted instantly as he was jumped by three Slytherin girls. Tracey, Lily, and Astoria had all pounced on him the moment he entered his dorm room. He was shocked they were up there but Blaise must have led them up. Daphne, ever the Slytherin, glanced disapprovingly from

the corner of the bed, but her gaze softened when her eyes fell on Harry.

"Let him breathe guys," said an amused Blaise once it was clear they were choking Harry to death. Chastised, Lily picked herself off the ground, letting go of Harry's right side and glared. Tracey held on a moment longer before reluctantly getting off of Harry as well, leaving Astoria, who had been pinned between the two girls on either side and Harry below to slowly lift herself up. Harry checked himself for any further injuries before limping the rest of the way to his bed.

"What happened?" Harry and Tracey said simultaneously.

"You first," answered Harry and Lily together. Nervous laughter spread, relieving the room of any tension that had been there.

"Well, needless to say you won," Blaise said. "Congratulations. Although a bit arrogant even for you, you did manage to squeak by."

"Yeah, since when is Malfoy good at dueling?" asked Daphne.

"Apparently Snape gave him some private lessons to get him into shape to beat me. And it wasn't arrogance, Blaise, it was confidence."

"Try overconfidence," chimed in Astoria. "You thought you would walk off the platform without breaking a sweat. Instead you broke a bone and lost a lot of blood."

"Well, I won't make that mistake again."

"You'd better not!" she fired back. "That was stupid."

Harry took a deep breath and ran a hand through his hair, not wanting to start a fight with his friends.

"Ok, maybe I did go into it a little cocky. But you have to go out there believing you're going to win or else you've already lost."

Everyone collectively rolled their eyes in mock exasperation. Harry ignored them.

"Anyway, what happened with that green spell he fired at me? Did that hit?" Harry asked curiously.

"No," Daphne said. "When the dome collapsed after the duel was won, the spell was still coming but a rock managed to absorb the curse," she elaborated.

"How'd the rock get there?"

"I conjured it," finished Daphne with a smug look on her face.

"Thanks," Harry said after a moment.

"You're welcome. We thought it was the killing curse."

"Nope, apparently it was some sort of Curse of Living Death or something like that. The spell form of the draught."

"Never heard of it," Blaise said.

"That's what Draco claims anyway, and I didn't hear him cast it and it also didn't hit me so we'll just have to take him at his word."

"Therein lies the problem. I don't know how much I trust Malfoy's word. And since when do you call him Draco?" Blaise asked.

"I dunno," Harry said. "I had a strange conversation with him. Almost civil." Harry relayed the high points of his talk with Malfoy, which left everyone impressed.

"Malfoy's really got his political skills down to an art form," commented Blaise. Everyone seemed to agree with that statement.

"So did you hear about two of the Lions' Chasers getting taken out by the Heir?" Harry asked. Nods met his question.

"Bit of an inconvenience at best. Now Draco has a shot of winning. I was counting on him messing it up so I could get my spot back."

"Well, Malfoy is still rubbish," Tracey said.

"There's always that," agreed Harry.

The girls smirked, and then they broke up to go and attend to work. Blaise cornered Harry after they all left.

"So," he said grinning.

"What do you mean, 'so,' Blaise?"

"The duel, you looked a hell of a lot more competent than your average second year."

"And Malfoy didn't?"

"We're not talking about Malfoy, we're talking about you."

"So I'm a decent dueler," Harry conceded.

"Decent? Harry, you were bloody brilliant. How did you learn all of that? You know everyone is going to be asking you. At least the ones who aren't terrified of you," amended Blaise.

Harry laughed. "Well, it seems everyone either hates me or is terrified of me. At least they all respect me right?" Silence met his statement. "Right?"

"Right," Blaise said a little too quickly for Harry's liking. He let it slide for now.

"So, we're going to prank Snape," declared Harry. Blaise looked like Christmas had come early.

"Really?"

"Yup."

"What's the plan?"

"Well, we're pranking him twice really. The first thing I need to know is his favorite type of chocolate."

"Why?"

"You'll understand soon enough, Blaise. Don't question my pranking abilities. They are above that."

"Right, oh great harbinger of trouble," Blaise muttered sarcastically. Harry broke into a grin reminiscent of his father. "And the second prank?"

"You know how his robes are always billowing out?"

"Yeah, and how incredibly jealous you are—"

"Shut up." Harry went into detail on his second plan while Blaise smirked and nodded approvingly, sometimes throwing in his own bits of advice, twice Harry incorporated them into the plan.

"You have a devious mind, Mr. Potter."

"And you have a twisted sense of humor, Mr. Zabini."

"Blame it on my Dad. It's his lack of almonds in his body system." They both shared a laugh at Mr. Zabini's paranoia over almonds.

"Or else since he can't seem to smell anything, like trouble approaching in the form of his son."

"You're the one that's trouble, Potter. Everywhere you go something bad seems to happen." Harry didn't have an answer to that; it was true.

"Well I think it's about time for the dinner, we should go down."

"Damn," Harry said. "Snape gave me detention during the feast."

Blaise groaned in sympathy. "It's the last one though right?"

"Until he finds another reason to assign me detention at least."

"Good luck, mate," Blaise replied, clapping Harry on the back as they walked out, Blaise towards the feast and Harry towards his impending torture.

"If I'm not back by curfew send out a search party for my remains."

"Will do," saluted Blaise, and the two went their separate ways.

Harry's steps were sluggish and reluctant. Snape's detention was the last place he wanted to be. He'd much rather be enjoying the feast with his friends. It was with a resigned sigh that Harry opened the door to Snape's classroom.

"Sit," Snape said shortly. Intrigued, Harry complied.

"We are going to talk about your little duel with Mr. Malfoy."

"What about it?" Harry challenged.

"I want to know how you learned these spells, how you managed to win, and why you challenged a fellow Slytherin!" Snape finished angrily, banging his fist on the desk Harry was seated at. Harry regarded him coolly. Harry was slowly learning how to deal with Snape. Although baiting him wasn't the best idea, it often led to more entertaining results. Snape had lost his composure with Harry more times than Harry had had detention.

"In order of your questions, I taught myself, I'm simply a better dueler than Malfoy, even if he was trained by you, and he tried to curse me from behind so I challenged him to an honor duel."

Snape looked murderous. Harry glanced at him with a calculating look. "Check," Harry whispered to himself. "Your move."

Harry's mental shields were suddenly under attack. Last time, Harry had managed to eject Snape from his mind because he had hit the section Voldemort had been guarding. Unfortunately, this time he wasn't as lucky. He had yet to reach the stage of creating defenses and was still sorting through his memories, which made it that much easier for Snape to pry in. Harry fought valiantly against the curse and managed to kick out, nailing Snape in the shin, forcing him to drop his gaze.

"What the hell was that, Snivellus?" Harry was stunned. Literally. Snape's silent stupefy had taken him by surprise. Snape enervated him and petrified him. Harry noticed he was no longer in possession of his wand.

"We are going to find out what exactly is going on, Mr. Potter."

Snape attacked his shields again and broke his way through swiftly, but Harry didn't have a clue what he was looking for. Suddenly, Snape broke out of his mind and paled rapidly.

Harry glared as that was all he was capable of doing. "Shut up, Potter. What was that?"

As if Harry could talk. His glare only intensified. Oh, Snape was in a shit hole now. As soon as Harry was free that—

"Rip...tear...kill..." Harry mentally groaned. Not the voice again. That must have been what Snape heard. Snape freed Harry and warned him to be quiet. Revenge would have to wait. After waiting a couple minutes they peeked outside of the door and saw Lily on the floor with a look of surprise on her face. She was holding a two-way mirror. Her mouth was open as if she had been saying something.

Harry quickly pried the two-way mirror from her hands. He didn't know she had one. He would have to find out who she talked to on it.

"Harry!" yelled Blaise. He and Daphne were running towards him as fast as they could.

"Tracey was talking to Lily on the thing in the Great Hall and then she just froze."

"She's petrified, Mr. Zabini," Snape said quietly. The three remaining Slytherins looked horrified.

"The Great Hall is in chaos. Professor Dumbledore had to have everyone escorted to their common rooms. Tracey is in the hospital wing, Professor."

"Thank you, Miss Greengrass. Would the three of you take Miss Moon to the hospital wing? There is nothing that can be done for her at the moment," Snape said in a moment of surprise compassion. Harry deduced he didn't want to be cursed into tiny pieces by his least favorite student. Also, Snape had to keep up appearances... as did Harry. No one would find out of this personal feud between the two of them in public unless Harry chose to divulge it. There were more pressing matters at the moment anyway. Right now, he was more concerned with two of his closest allies— correction— friends being attacked by the thrice damned Heir of Slytherin. They

started taking Lily to the Hospital Wing and Snape banished Harry's wand to him. Harry caught it nimbly and pocketed it. Revenge could wait.

The unknown heir just surpassed Voldemort on Harry's shit list. He was going down.

The Slytherin common room was deathly quiet. Two of their own had been attacked by the Heir of Slytherin. Two confirmed purebloods, for that matter. Harry sat writing nonsense on a piece of paper; he was trying to figure how to gain Hermione back as a friend. He had just come downstairs from grabbing his invisibility cloak; he hadn't decided yet if he would sneak over to Gryffindor Tower and force her to talk to him. The situation was getting ridiculous.

Malfoy was off to the side seeming impatient, his bodyguards conspicuous by their absence. The wall moved aside and Daphne, Blaise, Crabbe, Goyle, and a couple other first years entered the room.

"Potter," Daphne greeted coolly. Harry looked at her warily. She never called him Potter anymore, unless she was royally pissed at Harry... Oh crap.

"I'm sorry for whatever it is I did, did wrong, or didn't do that I was supposed to Daphne," Harry said quickly. Blaise laughed.

"Put you in your place didn't she, Potter?" What the hell? Blaise too?

"What's with the last names?"

Blaise looked hesitant for a second. "Err— nothing. I was hoping you'd call me Zabini again. I like hearing my name. Zabini, Zabini, Zabini."

Harry stared at his best friend strangely. "Whatever flies your broomstick."

Daphne was staring at him unabashedly now. Harry locked eyes with her and she looked away quickly, staring pointedly at the ground.

"Why are you two acting so weird?" Harry glanced at them and then it dawned on him.

"Trace and Lils," he said quietly, almost soft enough that no one could hear.

Daphne looked up in shock.

"Who do you think is petrifying everyone, Harry?" Blaise asked.

"Well it was obviously the Heir of Slytherin, you know that."

"Well yes," Daphne interjected, "but who is it?"

"Don't you think I wish I knew?" Harry shouted. His shout attracted Malfoy's group. Crabbe and Goyle looked at Harry wearing identical looks of smugness that seemed unnatural on their faces.

"I want to kill who ever did that to Trace and Lils," Harry whispered dangerously.

"Tracey and Lily were petrified?" asked Blaise.

"Wrong thing to say," Harry whispered dangerously. He quickly pulled out his wand. "Who the hell are you two and what did you do with Blaise and Daphne?"

Harry was nailed by a disarming charm from behind and his wand flew out of his hands. He stared in surprise at Crabbe, who had deftly caught his wand. Malfoy was sputtering as well. Then, to both Harry and Malfoy's shock, Blaise, Daphne, Crabbe, and Goyle all ran out of the room as fast as they could, chucking Harry's wand into the corner. Harry could have sworn the four of them had a reddish tint to their hair...

"Accio wand!" Malfoy yelled. Harry's wand, in mid air, flew to Malfoy. They looked at each other and ran in hot pursuit of the imposters. Malfoy tossed Harry the phoenix and holly wand, and the two unnatural allies were pursuing common goals— and enemies— once again.

"Asking about the Heir?" Malfoy asked as they sprinted down the dungeon corridor.

"Yeah," Harry called out as they tried to cover as much ground as possible. After a few minutes they swore loudly.

"We lost them. They must have found a secret passage."

Harry swore again.

"Well I've got to find my two brainless bodyguards."

Harry snorted. "Good luck with that. Keep an eye out for Blaise and Daphne too would you? And I'll keep mine open for Crabbe and Goyle."

Malfoy nodded. "Fine. It is refreshing to be able to see again, as it were."

Harry almost started. Malfoy tried to tell a joke. What the hell was this world coming to? It was nice to know Malfoy could recognize a more immediate threat. His battle with Harry had been set aside for the moment, and for that Harry was grateful. Not that he couldn't handle the blonde; it just made things simpler.

Harry headed towards the Great Hall and began checking broom closets along the way. The sixth one he opened revealed Blaise and Daphne tumbling onto the floor in front of him. With his friends in such a predicament he couldn't turn down the opportunity for a prank now could he? It would be wrong; he was obligated as a Slytherin and Marauder descendent.

So that was why Harry ruffled up Daphne's hair, cast a mild cutting charm on her robes, shifted them sideways, and cast a very slight engorgement charm on her lips to make them appear puffy. He also took off one of her shoes. As for Blaise, his robes were completely removed leaving his undershirt and some shorts on. He then closed the door to the broom closet on the two of them, leaving it open enough to cast a pair of enervates. He hit Blaise first, then Daphne a moment later. All that was left was to watch. Harry hid in a nearby crevice to enjoy the entertainment.

"What the hell?" Blaise said, slightly disoriented. Then Daphne came back to consciousness a moment later. Harry knew when she had taken stock of her current situation when a loud smack echoed in

the hall, followed by furious shrieking. The door to the broom closet burst open and Daphne was screaming obscenities at Blaise like a banshee. She switched words so fast Harry wasn't exactly sure what she was saying. He just knew that he was impressed with her lung capacity because she hadn't stopped for breath once. Blaise looked thoroughly confused. Harry had the foresight to cast a silencing charm on himself, taking a leaf out of Blaise's book, and had collapsed on the floor laughing so hard, tears falling down his face. Daphne's hair looked like she had come from a wild snogging session and she seemed to have missed it. Daphne straightened her robes as best as she could, flipped her tussled hair over her shoulder, and gathering as much dignity as she could, flipped off Blaise and walked away, tripping on Harry's convulsing body.

"Potter..." she growled. Oh crap. Harry cancelled the silencing charm.

"Daphne," Harry greeted warmly. "So how long have you and Blaise been meeting in secret like this?" Harry asked curiously. Daphne flushed, showing more emotion than Harry was used to.

"Me and— and that?" she shrieked, waving a finger in Blaise's direction and quickly returning to her previous anger.

"Now Daph, Blaise isn't all that bad. I mean, he's not as good looking as I am, but I'm sure there must be some redeeming qualities there." Harry appeared to be in deep thought. "Just because I can't think of one doesn't mean there isn't one." Blaise looked calculating at Harry, slowly putting two and two together the way only Blaise could.

"You pranked us didn't you?" he asked slyly. Daphne stopped, mid rant, to turn her glare on Harry.

"I don't know what you're talking about. I found the two of you in a broom closet, of all places." Oh shit. Harry didn't mean to say he found them there. Oh well, he could play it off.

"Liar," Blaise said. Daphne's eyes glittered dangerously and the two of them advanced on him.

"Hey, now you should be nicer to your friends, after all, two of them are in the hospital wing," Harry pleaded, holding his hands out in a peaceful position.

"That was low, Harry, even for you." Harry pretended to not be offended by Blaise's scathing remark. He was just mad Harry got him pretty good.

"Honest though, I think someone tried to get the two of you out of the way," Harry said seriously. "I got interrogated by a couple of look-a-likes. Polyjuice potion by the looks of it. Malfoy's two cronies Crabbe and Goyle were impersonated too. They were interrogating me and Malfoy about the Heir."

"Malfoy and I," Daphne corrected absently.

"I'm not in Pureblood English one-oh-one," retorted Harry before going on with his story.

"When they fled the common room, I'm pretty sure that the potion was ending and I saw some red hair start popping up."

"Weasleys," growled Daphne. "I can see the twins doing that to us because they would find it funny." Harry almost sighed in relief. This was too good to be true. Daphne was blaming their predicament on the twins.

"You don't happen to think it too much of a coincidence, that Harry found us right when we woke up?" Daphne looked at Blaise and Harry counted in his head. One...two... Daphne turned back to Harry. But he was already running. He ran right up the stairs, took a left, and found himself running through the courtyard and before he knew it he had reached Hagrid's hut. Shrugging, Harry decided to knock on the door.

"Who's there?" Hagrid boomed.

"It's Harry," he called out. Hagrid tentatively opened the door.

"Harry Potter," he said somewhat warmly, although hesitantly.

"Hey Hagrid," Harry replied, a little too brightly. Hagrid didn't notice.

"Come on in," he said grudgingly. "I'll make yeh a cuppa."

Harry snuck a glance behind him and followed Hagrid inside.

"So, how're yeh doin, Harry? It's been awhile since I've last seen yeh," Hagrid said as he set some rock cakes on the table, presumably for Harry to eat.

"Err— not bad. It's been a much better year. Although a couple of friends of mine were attacked after the Chamber opened again."

"Again?" Hagrid asked quickly. "How'd yeh know it was opened before?"

Harry shrugged. Hagrid looked a little nervous.

"Everything okay, Hagrid?" The half-giant jumped, clearly startled that he was being spoken too. He had been watching his window.

"Of course," Hagrid boomed. Fang suddenly started barking. Hagrid glanced warily out the window and picked up his crossbow.

"Stay quiet. You got that cloak of yours?" Harry nodded.

"Good, get under it." Harry complied, curious as to what was going to happen.

"What's going on?" Hagrid regarded Harry for a second before deciding to elaborate.

"The Chamber of Secrets was opened before. They accused me of doing it. That's why I was expelled. But I didn't do it. Yeh've got ter believe me," pleaded Hagrid. Harry nodded slowly.

"I believe you. You aren't the type of person to go about killing people on purpose." Of course, owning the bloody pets was another thing entirely. A three headed dog comes to mind.

"So where were you going with that?" Harry asked.

"They've come ter take me ter... Azkaban." Hagrid shivered, but it wasn't from the cold. Azkaban was a place where the potential to lose your mind was greater than the potential to get out. With

dementors guarding the prison, your cell was really your mind. Your worst memories would play over in a repeating cycle, ceaselessly, until the dementors left you alone. Harry didn't think he would be able to survive Azkaban if he was sent there. Not intact.

"They think you're behind the attacks then," Harry said. Hagrid nodded slowly.

"Can yeh find out who is doing it? I can't go there, Harry. I can't. Please help me," implored Hagrid. Harry could only nod his assent as Hagrid's tears welled up and fell into his beard. Fang slobbered on Harry's hand as well.

"Thanks, Harry. Yer Mum would be proud of yeh." Harry was surprised his father wasn't included in that statement. He was about to ask but a loud knock echoed in the hut.

"Quick, under the cloak." Harry complied and Hagrid opened the door, crossbow in hand.

"Good afternoon, Hagrid," Dumbledore said pleasantly, although he didn't seem to be in a pleasant mood. "Could we please come in?"

"Professor Dumbledore sir," Hagrid said, hastily putting away his crossbow. "Of course." Dumbledore entered the hut and seemed to stare right at Harry. He pulled the cloak tighter around his body. The Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge, followed behind, with Lucius Malfoy bringing up the rear.

"Not you," Hagrid growled. "Get outta my house!"

"Believe me when I say I want to be here as much as you want to be in your hou— did you call this a house?" Malfoy asked, bemused. "Really, my house-elf has better quarters than this." Fang growled as well, but Malfoy didn't even seem to register the dog.

"Bad business, Hagrid, my dear boy," boomed Fudge, always the politician. "An attack on two purebloods. The Ministry has got to act. It will only be temporary, mind you, until the attacks stop, but as your record is already against you..." Fudge trailed off.

"Not Azkaban prison," croaked Hagrid.

"I should think the accommodations will be an improvement," sneered Malfoy. Fudge almost smirked.

"I want it to be known, Cornelius, that Hagrid has my full confidence. Removing him from the school will not cause any change in the nature of these attacks. Hagrid is not the culprit here."

"I will be seen as a coward if I do not act, Dumbledore," Fudge whined. Malfoy nodded sagely.

"You worry more about what other people think of your actions than of the consequences of your actions, Cornelius," Dumbledore said gravely.

"Of course I do," Fudge snapped, "I'm a politician." Dumbledore sighed.

"There are none more blind than those who will not see," Dumbledore replied.

"Must you always speak in riddles, Dumbledore?"

"You fail to see beyond yourself, Cornelius. Blinded by the position you have obtained, you no longer serve for justice, but instead for power. By failing to take into consideration the consequences of your actions, you are sentencing an innocent man to hell."

"Now see here, Dumbledore, he was held responsible for the crime once, I have reasonable cause to bring him in," argued Fudge stubbornly.

"I wish you had the courage to do the right thing, Cornelius. Apparently, that is wishful thinking beyond even the greatest optimist." Dumbledore gave Hagrid an apologetic look.

"Come along, Hagrid," Fudge said in a grandfatherly voice. Realizing he had no choice, Hagrid followed glumly.

"If anybody wanted to know anything, they should follow the spiders. That would do 'em right," Hagrid said, glancing nervously at Harry's hiding spot. If he could be anymore obvious...

Harry caught Malfoy staring at him and he moved away slowly from the corner he had been under.

"I trust the situation will sort itself out, Dumbledore. The board of governors is not pleased. Talks of suspending you have begun if the school is not safe and secure."

"Well, if Mr. Fudge is correct in his assumption, there should be no more problems," Dumbledore challenged. Fudge glared at the ancient looking wizard.

"I expect my gamekeeper back if another attack were to occur."

"This problem has been solved, Dumbledore," Fudge snapped. He beckoned Malfoy and the trio left Hagrid's hut. Dumbledore was about to follow, but he stopped to pet Fang.

"Please meet me in my office, Harry," Dumbledore whispered. He straightened up, and followed the trio out.

Harry remained frozen in his spot and slowly shook himself out of his stupor.

"The old man is good," Harry whispered. He did as he was asked and headed to the Headmaster's office. When he arrived there he realized he didn't know the password. The gargoyle apparently knew he was coming though, and allowed him passage to the office.

Harry entered the office and made himself comfortable in Dumbledore's chair and waited for the Headmaster to arrive.

An amused smile was on Dumbledore's face when he walked into the room to see Harry, legs stretched on top his desk, leaning back in his favorite chair, and idly tossing crumbled bits of parchment at an annoyed phoenix, who was minutes away from his Burning Day, so really wasn't that capable of moving much.

"I don't think Fawkes is enjoying that as much as you are, Harry," Dumbledore said with a smile. Fawkes trilled in agreement. Harry threw another piece of parchment at the bird, which promptly burst into flame.

"You wished to talk to me, Professor?" Harry asked. Dumbledore nodded, and took a seat in a nearby chair, allowing Harry to sit in his own.

"I had a couple questions for you—"

"Before we start with the inquisition," interrupted Harry, "would you care for a lemon drop?"

Dumbledore laughed and nodded politely. "Accio lemon drop," Harry intoned. He resolved to never do that again. He was covered in lemon drops. They came from everywhere, under the desk, inside the bookshelves, out of Dumbledore's pockets, one from Dumbledore's beard, one from underneath Fawkes's tail, two from under the Sorting Hat, one from behind the portrait of Phineas Nigellus Black, three different bags that overturned their contents on his head, one seemed to be never ending, and finally one from Harry's pocket, which he hadn't a clue how it had gotten there. Dumbledore pulled out his wand and cancelled Harry's summoning spell, sending most of the candies back to their places, while Harry admired the wand he was using. He had never seen Dumbledore's wand up close before.

"What is your wand made of, Professor?" Harry asked curiously. Dumbledore looked startled. He stopped sucking on the lemon drop and held the wand out, looking at it curiously.

"Elder wood and Thestral hair," Dumbledore said finally.

"Interesting combination," commented Harry. "The elder wood is said to ward off evil, while the Thestral hair represents Death itself. Contradicts the impression that dying is bad, doesn't it?"

"Death is the next great adventure," Dumbledore answered.

"I remember you telling me that. Just commenting on the uniqueness, Professor."

Dumbledore seemed anxious to change topics, but if that was due to the importance of his questions or the delicacy of the topic of his wand, Harry did not know.

Dumbledore finished a lemon drop happily before turning a grave expression on Harry.

"We have many things to talk about, Harry."

Harry leaned back in the now lemon drop free chair. "Ask away, Professor."

"Well, my first question is: why were you in Knockturn Alley?"

Harry laughed. "Blaise and I snuck away to check it out and ended up ducking into Borgin and Burkes for a bit. Why are you concerned?"

Dumbledore frowned. "You misunderstand me. I meant more recently."

"I'm not sure I know what you're talking about, sir." Dumbledore looked straight at Harry, whose gaze remained firm and unflinching. He sighed and moved onto another subject.

"I'd like to know more about this duel with Mr. Malfoy." Dumbledore said.

"Would it be alright if I asked a question first, sir? We can trade off. You answered the question about your wand, and then I answered yours."

"Fair enough, what would you like to know? I can't guarantee an answer but I will not lie."

"How did you see me in Hagrid's hut?"

"Ah, a very good question. Well, I noticed a set of footprints going towards the hut and not returning, so I safely assumed someone else was there. A simple non-verbal homenum revelio showed me the presence of another human, and I was thus able to know your location."

"So you didn't actually see me, or even know that it was me?"

"That's another question," Dumbledore chided gently, although his smile gave him away.

"I also cast a finite incantatem to see if someone was under an invisibility spell of some sort. When the spell failed, I realized the invisibility was used by other means, an invisibility cloak. As you are the only person I know with an invisibility cloak, I knew it was you."

"So you assumed that I didn't lend it to anybody. That's a bit of a calculated risk."

"I don't believe you would ever lend anyone your cloak without you, Harry."

Harry vowed to keep that in mind.

"Right, so you wanted to know about the duel." Dumbledore beamed.

"Well, Malfoy had been repeatedly insulting me, and it had become rather annoying, to the point of him cursing me when my back was turned. So I challenged him to an honor duel."

"What I'm curious about, is where you learned the spells you used. They were fairly advanced for the second year curriculum."

"That's another question as well, Professor," Harry stated. "So that will bring us even."

Dumbledore nodded in amused assent. "Well, I taught myself the spells, reading from various books."

"You would be hard pressed to find a book in our library that covers the blinding curse," Dumbledore commented. "That is dark magic."

"Your point?" Harry asked.

"You're not telling me the truth."

"You're making false assumptions," Harry fired back. "I never said that I got the books from the library."

Dumbledore frowned again. He started to speak but Harry beat him to it. "I think we're finished for today, Headmaster." Harry stood up to leave and began to walk out, waiting from Dumbledore to stop him.

"I would like to ask you one last question," he said slowly. Harry looked to the old wizard from his position by the door and waited expectantly.

"Is there anything you wish to tell me?" he asked.

"Actually, yes." Dumbledore looked intrigued. "What are you doing about the Heir of Slytherin? Two of my friend's have been petrified. You know as well as I do that Hagrid isn't behind it."

Dumbledore suddenly looked much older than his years. "I am doing everything I can, Harry—"

"Well it's obviously not enough!" Harry snapped. Dumbledore sighed again.

"I am sorry for your friends' predicament, Harry. The mandrake potion, once finished, will revive them."

"This has happened before, Professor. I'm more concerned with what the outcome will be this time."

"You blame the effect, Harry, yet you fail to look at the cause."

Harry looked at Dumbledore as if he was mad. "What would you call the cause then, Professor?" he retorted.

"That's what I'm trying to discover. I know who is opening the chamber, but not how."

"What!" Harry roared. "You know who is opening the chamber yet you do nothing? Who is it?"

Dumbledore surveyed Harry over his half-moon spectacles, obviously debating whether or not to tell Harry what he knew.

"Lord Voldemort," he said finally.

"Good day, Headmaster," Harry said, and walked out.

Lord Voldemort? Honestly? What was he thinking? How was Voldemort even here? Ah, but Voldemort is inside your head. Was Harry opening the Chamber?

His thoughts directed him towards Gryffindor Tower and he absentmindedly said the password: wattlebird, to the Fat Lady, who stared at him disapprovingly before grudgingly admitting him entrance. His future-self had slightly taken over because Harry was on auto-pilot, just unable to process that Tracey and Lily were petrified. He walked right into the person he was subconsciously looking for.

"Hermione," Harry said. She was walking out of the common room and didn't even pay him any mind. She bumped right into him but seemed to ignore her surroundings.

"Hermione!" He grabbed her and she spun, dropping her diary. Harry grabbed it. If she wasn't going to talk to him, he was going to find out what she wrote about him. He followed after her, but she refused to even turn around.

"Fine!" Harry shouted. "Just so you know, you don't know everything that's going on here! So don't act like you do!" Harry yelled after her, storming off back into the dungeons. Hermione stopped, mid step, and turned around, but Harry was gone. Confused, she headed back to her common room.

Once in his dorm, Harry opened the diary on his bed and flipped through its pages.

"Blank!" he yelled. "What?" Harry started casting diagnostic spells and revealing spells to show the words he knew were there. Nothing showed up.

Harry cursed again and grabbed a page forcefully.

"Ow!" He pulled his finger back, cutting it on the paper. He went to wipe the blood off the page but it had vanished. He stared at the pages in confusion. He grabbed a quill, dipped it in ink, and tentatively wrote on the page.

Suddenly, words appeared on the page.

"Would you stop doodling nonsense words and actually write something, Hermione? It's rather annoying."

Harry stared at the diary.

"Hello," Harry wrote.

"This isn't Hermione is it?"

"No," Harry wrote. "This is Harry Potter."

"Tom Riddle. A pleasure."

Harry's mind was suddenly bursting. Voldemort had caught interest in the name Tom Riddle. Harry realized too late that the name Tom Riddle was Voldemort's real name.

He was still writing continuously to the diary and soon Harry began to lose control of his mental faculties. The last thing he remembered reading from the diary was:

"Now, Harry, I want you to do something for me." The diary was slipped into his pocket and Harry left the common room in the same way Hermione had. Voldemort laughed in Harry's mind gleefully...

Chapter 14: Weasleys, Interlude

After the attack on Mrs. Norris... Location: Gryffindor common room.

"So you think Harry Potter is behind the attack, Ron?" Fred asked his youngest brother while George looked on curiously.

"Yeah," Ron nodded vigorously. "It has to be. He's a Slytherin and— I heard rumors he's a parselmouth." Ron said the last in a harsh whisper. George raised an eyebrow. The two weren't inclined to believe Harry was the Heir; after all they had just helped him prank Lockhart. Anyone who dabbled in pranking was alright in their books.

"That is something to consider, oh brother mine. But what do you want us to do about it young Ronniekins?" Ron glared.

"I tried Hermione Granger but she wouldn't listen to me—"

"And rightly so," interrupted Fred.

"But I think if we disguise ourselves as some of his friends and ask him we can get a confession out of him. They're probably bragging about it in the Slytherin common room."

Fred and George appeared to give it some thought. Ginny walked up on them.

"Well, Malfoy would be the heir before Harry," chirped Ginny. "But I'd love to help you ask him."

"Are you thinking—" began Fred

"Polyjuice," finished George.

"It will be tricky, but if we can steal some ingredients from Snape—" Fred began.

"Hence the tricky part—" commented George. The two twins began to trade off sentences.

"We can brew the Polyjuice Potion."

"Lets you transform into someone else, just need a hair of the person you're changing into."

"It will take about a month to brew, and then we just need to catch the Slytherins unawares."

"Just make sure we have them out of the way for about an hour, that's how long it will last."

"Can I help?" interrupted Ginny. Fred shrugged.

"No," Ron said sharply. Ginny stomped on his foot, causing him to swear.

"I don't see why not ickle Ronnie. You two can talk to Harry, Fred and I will talk to Malfoy. Knocks out two Fwoopers with one Silencing Charm."

Ron shrugged, currently holding his toe and glancing fearfully at his younger sister.

"Just don't fawn all over him," Ron snapped at Ginny. She ignored him.

"We'll get the ingredients and start brewing. We'll let you know when it's taken care of."

As the two walked off, they looked at each other and shook their heads.

"It'll be good practice at least."

"And who knows when we'll need some spare Polyjuice Potion."

"Just think of the possibilities..." Fred trailed off with a wistful sigh.

Fred and George managed to sneak into the Restricted Section with the help of their trusty Marauder's Map and found the book they were looking for. As horrid as they were in Snape's Potions class, they were actually quite good at the art, and fairly knowledgeable. Potions can be quite the aid in mischief making after all. Once they copied out the page on the Polyjuice Potion, they replaced Moste

Potente Potions, snuck out, and a few minutes later after a whispered, "Mischief Managed," all was back to normal.

"So where do we brew the thing?" Fred asked his twin.

"Let's go with that secret passage behind the mirror on the fourth floor. We're the only ones who know about it."

"Excluding the Marauders anyway," Fred said with a grin.

"Right."

So the brewing began in earnest. Fred went out and grabbed the ingredients they already had in stock: lacewing flies, knotgrass, fluxweed (picked at the full moon), and leeches. The powdered bicorn horn arrived two days later, and the next potions class, Fred managed to create a distraction while George snuck in and stole the boomslang skin.

Snape was furious about the blown cauldron which had conveniently missed all the Gryffindors and only injured the Slytherins, giving Fred detention for a week and losing his house a hundred points, but it really didn't matter. George was the better potions brewer anyway.

The lacewing flies were stewed continuously for twenty-one days, and during that time period, everything seemed mostly quiet. They observed Malfoy, while Ron and Ginny observed Potter (although Ginny seemed to be admiring more than staring).

Fred and George had already concluded that they would be changing into Crabbe and Goyle, for obvious reasons. Ron had chosen Blaise since that was the only guy Harry talked to. Ginny couldn't decide yet, and would merely take whoever was with Blaise at the time they were ready. The twin terrors were smart enough to observe their targets habits, to make sure they acted appropriately. As long as they acted slow and stupid, they would be ok. So they began modeling themselves after their brother Ron. They realized they ate too much though, so instead refocused on the bodyguards of the Malfoy heir. (His hair seemed to be more important to the git than being an heir anyway.)

Halloween arrived and the potion was nearly finished, only a couple more days to go. The Potter-Malfoy duel had become the talk of the school. Fred and George had even taken time off to collect bets. They had long ago placed the last ingredient into the potion and were allowing it to simmer for forty-eight more hours before it would be ready for use. They took the time to observe Crabbe and Goyle and plot on how to get them together and knocked out.

"I'm thinking sleeping draught. We can nick some from the hospital wing."

"Good plan, George," said George.

"I thought I was Fred?" asked Fred.

"Well it was a good plan George came up with, regardless."

Fred scowled. They headed to the Great Hall to watch the duel. They were surprised as hell when the dark spells came out.

"Maybe Ron has a point," Fred said slowly. Malfoy conjured the snake and they waited with baited breath for Harry to speak to it. The moment was short-lived. The snake was just banished back at Malfoy. He let it dissolve out of existence and returned to spell-casting.

They winced when Harry's cheek was cut. Malfoy 1, Harry 0.

"Looks like first blood for me, Potter," taunted Malfoy.

"That wasn't very smart," George said.

"Since when was Malfoy known as the sharpest quill in the box?" Fred answered wisely.

George nodded sagely. "You are right, my dear brother."

"Indubitably."

They turned back and managed to watch the last flurry of spells, which left both combatants unconscious.

"Who won?" Fred asked quietly.

"Potter is the victor," declared Snape, as he approached Malfoy and cast charms to bring him to medical care. He grudgingly did the same for Harry. They saw Greengrass lower her wand after blocking Malfoy's curse.

The twins headed towards their younger siblings.

"Well, we should be ready in a couple days. We'll go check after the two of them are out of the hospital wing," declared George.

"After two days, we'll see if they're there. If they're not, then we'll start our interrogation," concluded Fred.

"Right, well how are we going to take care of the people we're turning into?" asked Ron.

"Sleeping draught in the food. We can talk to the house-elves."

"Won't that knock them out at the table though?" asked Ginny. Silence answered her statement.

"Damn," George said after a minute.

"Good point, young Ginevra."

"Don't call me that," she hissed.

"You know, Fred, she reminds me of a friend of Charlie's, the illustrious Nymphadora Tonks. She wasn't very fond of her name either."

"Or any of our clever variations," added Fred. The two of them snickered.

"Well, I suppose a stunner would be the simple way to do it, then stuff them in a broom closet," George said.

"That lacks our normal finesse."

"But it is effective."

"Too true."

"Well, that's settled. We'll do it after dinner. The night we are ready."

The four Weasleys separated and returned to the common room. It was then McGonagall made her announcement.

"There was a triple attack today," she said, sounding deathly quiet.

"Who was it?" called out the twins' good friend, Lee Jordan.

"Colin Creevey, Angelina Johnson—" both twins swore, "and Alicia Spinnet." The twins swore louder.

"Oy, is the bloody heir going after our Quidditch team now?"

Katie Bell had broken into tears and Fred and George had walked over to comfort her. Wood had torn the assignment he had been holding. Their first match was in four days. And they were now short two chasers.

"Language, Mr. Weasley." Fred waved it off.

"If anyone has any information, please come forward. And I ask that you all stay in groups, we don't want this to happen again." McGonagall left.

"Staying in groups seems to make us all easier targets." Katie wailed.

"Well, I'll need two chasers for the game against Slytherin," said Wood despairingly. Ginny Weasley offered to play Chaser and Wood nodded. Another girl, Patricia Stimpson, in Fred and George's year, also offered to chase, for the match. Wood nodded morosely. She had done decent at the tryouts. Wood realized he needed Ginny as Seeker though.

"One more Chaser?" Dean Thomas offered his services and Wood shrugged and brought him aboard.

"We'll need to practice two or three times a day at least to get you all into a team."

Wood's Quidditch mode took over and he began setting practice schedules. The next two days were a blur, as they practiced for the match, but they managed to send Ron up to the infirmary.

"Nobody is there," he said.

"We go after practice then," Fred said to the lot of them. They trudged back up and changed after the grueling session, which had only showed them that a quick catch of the snitch was their only shot of winning, and headed down to the Great Hall. Malfoy was absent, as was Potter and company. Crabbe and Goyle were there though, so when they left the twins followed. Two stupefies later, the two were shoved into a closet, parted of a few hairs, their robes and shoes, and were left where they were. Blaise and Daphne entered the Great Hall moments after the twins left, and they grabbed some food before leaving, obviously distracted about something. Ron and Ginny followed them, and with Fred and George's help, managed to subdue them, before also stuffing them in a closet. A couple hairs were pulled from each of them, and then they hurried to the fourth floor.

"Ok, here we go guys. Just drop the hairs in and drink up. We'll have one hour. Fred and I know where the common room is, but it would be best to tag along with some firsties since we don't know the password." Four smoking goblets of Polyjuice were passed around. The hairs were all placed inside and they each changed color.

"Do you have an adequate toast, Fred?"

"Of course, George. Remember that Spanish girl we met?"

"The one that gave us some firewhiskey?"

"That's the one."

"What about her?"

"She taught me a Spanish drinking toast."

"Splendid, old chap, let's hear it."

"Ok, everyone follow my moves. Arriba," Fred said, lifting his goblet into the air. The other three followed suit.

"Abajo," Fred continued, lowering the goblet. Again, the redheads mimicked his actions.

"Al centro," he said, bringing it back to level with his lips.

"Por entro," he finished, and the four downed the goblets.

They all rapidly changed into the people whose hair they had taken. Crabbe, Goyle, Zabini, and Greengrass were soon standing in their places. Crabbe (Fred) and Goyle (George) shrugged off their robes and wore the Slytherin ones over their troll like bodies. Goyle handed Ginny his old robes, as hers no longer fit and they had forgotten to take the other set of robes. Ron's fit fine. A couple of duplication charms were cast on the Slytherin crests and the once proud Gryffindor lion was replaced by the Slytherin serpent. Prepared, they tried out their voices.

"Testing, one, two, three," George said.

"You've got to grunt more," answered the amused voice of Ron, sounding like Blaise Zabini.

"Yeah," grunted Fred.

"Perfect," Ron answered.

"That wasn't much of a toast," George complained.

"Yeah, well, doesn't matter."

They tried walking in their new bodies until they got the hang of it, and then headed towards the dungeons. By Fred's watch, it took them about twenty minutes to get ready, and another ten to find their way downstairs.

"Now we need to find some first years."

Fortunately, not ten minutes later, a couple first years started heading to the common room. The four of them acted like they were just talking, and then followed after them. The first year in front said the password to the wall, opening it up and admitting them passage into the Slytherin lair.

Ginny and Ron, as Daphne and Blaise respectively, headed towards Harry, who was writing on some paper. "Potter," Ginny greeted coolly, trying to hold in her excitement at talking to Harry Potter.

"I'm sorry for whatever it is I did, did wrong, or didn't do that I was supposed to, Daphne," Harry said quickly. Ron laughed. Ginny kept up her mask of indifference, trying not to let any admiring glances escape.

"Put you in your place didn't she, Potter?" taunted Ron, unable to resist.

"What's with the last names?" Harry asked.

Ron looked hesitant for a second. He was too out of character. "Err—nothing. I was hoping you'd call me Zabini again. I like hearing my name. Zabini, Zabini, Zabini."

Harry stared at Ron strangely, making him almost break into a sweat. "Whatever flies your broomstick." He almost let out a sigh.

Ginny was staring at Harry unabashedly now. Harry looked away with her and she looked away quickly, staring pointedly at the ground. She was caught out. She was not very good at trying to ask Harry questions. Why did she come anyway?

"Why are you two acting so weird?" asked Harry with a glance.

"Trace and Lils," he said quietly, almost soft enough that no one could hear. But Ron and Ginny heard.

Ginny looked up in shock. Were the two of them attacked by the heir?

"Who do you think is petrifying everyone, Harry?" pressed Ron, expecting Harry to confess.

"Well it was obviously the Heir of Slytherin, you know that." Ron let a wry grin appear on his face.

"Well yes," Ginny interjected, "but who is it?"

"Don't you think I wish I knew?" Harry shouted. His shout attracted Malfoy's group. Fred and George looked over at Harry wearing identical looks of smugness that seemed unnatural on their faces. They knew Harry wasn't the Heir. Ron and Ginny groaned. They would be hearing it from the twins later.

"I want to kill who ever did that to Trace and Lils," Harry whispered dangerously.

"Tracey and Lily were petrified?" asked Ron. Ginny wanted to slap him. Her brother was so thick sometimes.

"Wrong thing to say," Harry whispered dangerously. He quickly pulled out his wand. "Who the hell are you two and what did you do with Blaise and Daphne?"

Fred and George approached Malfoy and sat around him, looking at their alleged leader in awe.

"What took the two of you so long anyway?"

"Food," grunted Fred. George nodded solemnly. Malfoy shrugged.

"It's a shame that two purebloods were attacked, but at least it was Potter's group of friends," commented Malfoy. Fred and George shared a look.

"Who was attacked?" George ventured.

"Moon and Davis. I already told you that," Malfoy said.

"Do you know who attacked them?" Fred asked.

"I already told you Crabbe, I have no idea. It's obviously the Heir but, I don't know. Father told me to just keep my head down and stay out of the Heir's way, that he wouldn't harm purebloods, but..." Malfoy trailed off sounding slightly fearful.

Fred and George shared a look.

"So did you place your bets on the next attack? Personally, I'm hoping it's Granger. Or maybe one of the Weasleys, since blood-traitors are only a step up from Mudbloods."

Fred held his anger in check, as did George.

"Don't you think I wish I knew?" Harry yelled, catching the twins' attention. They turned a smug glance on their younger siblings. Of course Harry wasn't the Heir.

"Wonder what that's about," commented Malfoy. They looked on and saw Harry raise his wand at his two friends. He looked furious. Fred glanced at his watch.

"Time to go," he muttered to George. "Expelliarmus," he called, knocking Harry's wand out of his hand and unknowingly obtaining allegiance from the wand, once he caught it. Malfoy was sputtering.

The twins glanced at the other two and the four of them ran out of the room, Fred chucking Harry's wand into the corner on the way out. Their hair started reverting back to normal, and they weren't sure if the Slytherins had seen it. They ran swiftly out of the dungeons and Fred pulled out the Marauder's Map and activated it on the run. They dodged through secret passages, trying to hide from the two Slytherins chasing them, and were finally able to catch their breath after a few minutes, when they had lost their pursuers.

"That was close," whispered Ginny.

"No kidding. We find out anything?" asked Ron.

"Well it wasn't Malfoy," added George dryly.

"He said it was Harry," deadpanned Fred.

Ron's eyes lit up.

"He's joking," George said, before Ron's delusions could get hold of him.

"Well we did learn one thing," Ginny said. "Lily Moon and Tracey Davis were attacked. So it sounds like the Heir doesn't like Harry."

"Who does?" asked Ron. Fred and George rolled their eyes.

"We learned something else too," chipped in Fred. "Malfoy's father seems to know a bit about what's going on. And our Map sees through Polyjuice too," Fred added to George in a whisper.

"Good to know."

"So now what do we do?"

"Wait here for a little while, and then clean up the equipment in the passage, then head back to the common room."

The four of them waited for awhile, staying quiet. Fred followed the dots of Harry and Malfoy until they found their friends, and then traced them away from their current position. Harry stayed nearby for awhile before running out to Hagrid's hut.

"Strange," Fred mumbled. He closed the map with the password and they discussed their new plan about the Heir of Slytherin. It all led nowhere but it at least felt like they were being productive. Eventually, they headed back to the fourth floor and their hidden laboratory.

They made their way cautiously back to the fourth floor and began packing away their supplies. George had to run to the common room because he forgot their potions vial they were planning on storing the potion in so they waited patiently for him to make the trek there and back. When he returned they had already cleaned everything up and they poured the potion into the vial. George borrowed the map and checked it again, noting that Harry Potter was right outside their common room.

"That's not good," George said, beckoning Fred over. They watched as Harry was next to the dot labeled Hermione Granger. Granger's dot seemed to flicker back and forth between another name that they couldn't quite make out. Then Harry left and Granger's name stopped flickering as she re-entered the common room.

"Let's go."

They headed out to make it back to the common room safely, while eyeing the map warily. Potter had returned to his dorm, but using secret passages that only the twins were supposed to know about,

another dot was making its way towards their current position: Tom Riddle.

Chapter 15: Mind Games

Harry's inner mind was like a war zone. A foreign presence had entrenched itself and there was nothing Harry could do to remove it.

"You wrote in the diary, didn't you?" Future Harry asked his younger counterpart.

"Yeah, why?"

Future Harry shook his head. "That wasn't the brightest idea you've had."

"Well why didn't you tell me?"

"Forgot," Future Harry said absently. They stared at their opponents on the opposite end of the Hogwarts courtyard. Harry's brain had replicated. The two Dark Lords argued while keeping a wary eye on the dome trapping Harry's future memories. The old Voldemort that had been killed in the first duel had his memories scattered throughout the landscape, some integrating into Harry's mind but not being sorted and remembered, while others were sucked into the dome.

"So the diary and this Tom Riddle fellow is part Voldemort?"

"It is Voldemort."

"That complicates things," Harry said.

"Ya think?"

The two Voldemort's seemed to be communicating on the opposite end.

"We're going to have to hope someone is able to take the diary from you, with Voldemort's help we aren't strong enough to kick out Riddle."

Harry sat on the grass and stared at all the memory-Harrys walking by. Voldemort Avada Kedavra'd one of them. Harry's memory of crashing into a large tree in a Ford Anglia vanished.

"So what can you tell me about what's going on?" Harry asked while conjuring a slab of stone to block the killing curse fired at another memory.

"As far as I can tell, the Chamber was opened, right?"

"Yeah," agreed Harry.

"When it happened in my ti- Accio memory-" A memory nearing Voldemort was summoned out of harm's way and banished into the castle. "My time," Harry continued, "the attacks were orchestrated through Ginny Weasley. It might be worthwhile to check her."

"I don't think she's behind it this time," Harry said, conjuring a dog to prevent any stray memories to wander close to Voldemort.

"Oh, and there's a basilisk. Great big snake. That's what is attacking people. Don't look it in the eyes or you're dead."

"Got it," nodded Harry. "So what's going on now?"

"Well I think Riddle is directing you to attack people with the snake."

Harry swore.

"Exactly."

"We need to get both of them out of here."

"Riddle will be gone once you lose the diary. He can only possess you temporarily. As for Voldemort..." Future Harry trailed off.

"I'm not strong enough," Harry said.

"You're not strong enough," Future Harry repeated. "Between the two of us, we won't be able to beat him. If I just keep whittling away, I become stronger while he becomes weaker. And the Occlumency helps. It will give you more power over your mind."

"How much longer will I have to deal with him?"

"Probably a couple years still."

"WHAT?" Harry shouted.

"It's not that simple, and that's if we discount Riddle's influence. It will be difficult enough as it is. I can't even fight him to a stand still."

"So why doesn't he try to take over?" Harry asked. Future Harry shuddered.

"I don't know," Future Harry said slowly. "That could be disastrous."

"You're tellin me."

"So there's nothing we can do?"

"Not at the moment. Why don't you take a look at the memories I still have?"

"I can only access them here right?"

"Right. Voldemort's presence prevented our merging together, so they aren't fully yours. A good comparison would be like how we are now. Two friends standing together. My memories are mine, yours are yours. I can tell you my memories, or show them to you, but you can't really access them on your own until you've seen them."

"That makes sense," Harry said slowly.

"Of course it does. But I don't know what I can show you. I don't have access to a lot of memories yet, most of them are trapped in that dome. Let's see what we can get together that's relevant."

Future Harry went around the courtyard, beckoning memories to come forth. They would appear when he called them, and he sorted through them, apparently looking for something.

"Here's one," Future Harry called. "It's not exactly Voldemort but it is something to be wary of."

Harry walked up to the memory and touched it. He was instantly transported to the Defense classroom, Lockhart's office to be more precise.

"Are you going somewhere?" asked Memory-Harry. He was with Weasley, staring at the messy classroom. Lockhart looked like he was in a hurry to go somewhere.

"Er, well, yes," said Lockhart as he ripped a poster off his wall. "Urgent call— unavoidable— got to go—"

"What about my sister?" asked Ron jerkily.

"What's wrong with the fan-girl?" Harry asked his future counterpart. Future Harry gazed sadly at him, wishing things with Ginny had gone differently. But in this timeline, it was obvious that relationship would be difficult to start. Although, if it was fated to be, maybe they still had a chance...

"She was taken into the Chamber," Future Harry explained.

"Is that why Weasley is cooperating?"

"Ron is our— er was our— er was my best friend. We were looking out for each other."

"Doesn't seem like a good best friend here," muttered Harry.

"Give him a break. He was bit— near-sighted— when he was younger."

"Are you saying to give him a chance?"

"He's a good friend, Harry. I'm just saying, if the opportunity arises, take it. That's all."

"I guess," Harry grumbled, still resentful of Weasley's cracks about being a Dark Lord. The memory was still playing without them and Harry turned back to it.

"You mean you're running away?" Memory-Harry said disbelievingly. "After all the stuff you did in your books—"

"Books can be misleading," said Lockhart delicately.

"You wrote them!" shouted Memory-Harry.

"So that's why I remembered Lockhart was a fraud," Harry said.

"Never really liked him," Future Harry said absently.

"Do use your common sense. My books wouldn't have sold half as well if people didn't think I'd done all those things. No one wants to read about some ugly old Armenian warlock, even if he did save a village from werewolves. He'd look dreadful on the front cover. No dress sense at all. And the witch who banished the Bandon Banshee had a harelip. I mean, come on—"

"So you've just been taking credit for what a load of other people have done?" said Memory-Harry incredulously.

"You know, I knew he was thick, but this is ridiculous," commented Harry.

"Oh it gets worse," Future Harry said. "Watch."

"I had to track these people down," continued Lockhart. "Ask them exactly how they managed to do what they did. Then I had to put a Memory Charm on them so they wouldn't remember doing it. If there's one thing I pride myself on, it's Memory Charms. No, it's been a lot of work, Harry. It's not all book signings and publicity photos, you know. You want fame, you have to be prepared for a long hard slog."

Lockhart banged the lids of his trunk shut and locked them.

"Let's see. I think that's everything," he said, surveying Memory-Harry and Weasley. "Yes. Only one thing left."

"He's really going to try and Memory Charm us," Harry asked incredulously. "Obviously it didn't work but come on. Seriously? I'll kill him."

"Awfully sorry, boys, but I'll have to put a Memory Charm on you now. Can't have you blabbing my secrets all over the place. I'd never sell another book—"

Harry was proud to see Memory-Harry disarm Lockhart and blast him backward, over his trunk. Weasley caught the wand and threw it

out the window. That was rather stupid, since his wand seemed to be broken. Harry had seen enough, so he pulled out of the memory.

"That was madness. Lockhart is going to be on the receiving end of some painful spells."

"He ended up Memory Charming himself, if that's any consolation. Rather ironic to be honest," Future Harry said with a wry grin. Harry agreed.

"Hey, what's happening?" The ground had started to shake beneath them and they glanced at Voldemort and Riddle. Riddle was fading out of existence. Harry and Memory-Harry glanced grimly at each other and nodded. They charged Voldemort but he seemed to vanish. Harry felt himself pulled out of his mind and was once again aware of his physical surroundings.

"Harry Potter," Snape said, striding towards him with a questioning look on his face.

Harry quickly took stock of his surroundings. Someone must have taken the diary from him, but he didn't know who. And the odds were pretty good that someone was petrified.

"How long have you been here?" Snape asked quickly.

"I just got here," Harry said, somewhat confused. Snape seemed to battle with some inner emotion for a moment. His mind suddenly made up, he grabbed Harry by the arm and steered him into a classroom.

"What's going on?" Harry whispered. Snape cast a spell Harry hadn't heard of before: *muffliato*, then looked at him.

"There was another attack. It was around the corner from where you were standing. As much as I'd love you to be expelled, there is too much hatred towards my Slytherins to warrant blaming you for the attacks. The school would turn against us. We are going to leave and say we were never here. Is that understood?"

Harry nodded mutely.

"Good." Snape cancelled his spell and the two of them left the classroom and headed back to the dungeons. Harry risked a glance behind him and saw the petrified face of Fred Weasley staring back at him. Peeves was staring right at Harry, shock etched clearly on his face, his body smoking. Harry couldn't tell if he was alive or dead; then again Harry couldn't have answered that yesterday either. Either way, Harry couldn't help the ominous feeling settling over him. Harry had been the one to attack them.

The school was in an uproar over Fred Weasley's petrification. The only person happy at all was Filch; after all, Peeves was out of commission as well. Any animosity he harbored over the attack on Mrs. Norris had vanished.

The Gryffindor's were up in arms. That was another member of their Quidditch team out for the count. In the first match of the season, Slytherin ended up playing Ravenclaw and fortunately (in Harry's eyes) lost. They were unprepared for Gryffindor to manage to reschedule their game and ended up losing because of it. Malfoy had made a desperate lunge for the snitch but Chang had easily beaten him to it. The broom obviously didn't make the player. Flint could be heard cursing Malfoy's name late into the night. Harry assumed it was cursing anyway— any other possibilities for Flint screaming Malfoy's name was firmly entrenched in territory Harry would never cross.

Malfoy managed to stay on the team by the skin of his teeth but another loss and Flint made it perfectly clear, new brooms or not, Malfoy would be off the team. They would be playing Hufflepuff though, so Harry held no hopes of that occurring.

The next month went by rather quickly, and after Harry had lost the diary, no one had been attacked. Harry had focused on his Occlumency and was getting better at organizing his memories. He had made each memory color coded for his subjects at Hogwarts, and had found the assignments to be a little easier. Harry, Blaise, and Daphne had banded together, and the three of them had grown somewhat closer. The days leading up to Christmas vacation had been especially eventful. Blaise had run into the common room, waving parchment in his hand, while Harry had been playing chess with Daphne.

"I got permission from my parents, Harry. If you want to, you're invited over for the duration of the holidays," Blaise said excitedly.

"Sorry, Blaise," Harry began regrettably. Blaise frowned. "Malfoy already asked me." Then he grinned again before smacking Harry on the head.

"Git. So you're coming then?"

"Of course," Harry said. He turned to Daphne. "So what are you doing for the holidays, Daph?" Harry asked.

"Astoria and I are going with our parents to Brisbane until Boxing Day."

"Brisbane... Australia?" Blaise asked.

"Yes," Daphne said, smiling slightly. "It's really quite beautiful there," she said, her voice distant.

"If you say so," Blaise said with a shrug. He apologized briefly to run back upstairs, leaving Harry with Daphne.

"Harry, there's something I've been meaning to tell you. It's a bit of an apology actually but—" Daphne bit her lip, clearly hesitating. It was a strange experience for Harry. He wasn't used to Daphne Greengrass being nervous... at all.

"When I first started to be your friend," she said slowly, "it wasn't because I wanted to. Do you remember the warning I gave you?"

"Something about people watching what I was doing or something?" Harry asked.

"Something like that," she agreed. "Well, I ended up becoming your friend because my father wanted to find out more about you. You had become— a person of interest. You defeated you-know-who at the age of one, you're a Potter who was sorted into Slytherin— it all adds up to a potentially powerful player in today's society. My father was curious, so I've been learning more about you. Of course, after Astoria and I went to your house, something changed. Astoria wanted to be your friend just because she wanted to, and I started seeing you more as a friend than a powerful ally."

"Any reason why you're telling me this now?" Harry asked curiously.

"I want to be your friend. Like how Blaise is."

"You are my friend, Daphne."

"In your eyes, maybe. But not in mine. Not yet at least."

"What do you want me to tell you?"

"Nothing, really. I just wanted to say that. I'll know when I can honestly think of myself as your friend."

Blaise reappeared and Daphne checkmated Harry, before leaving to her own room.

"Everything alright, Harry?" Harry was staring at Daphne's retreating backside.

"Yeah, sure," he said absently.

"Did Daphne say something?"

"Yeah, sure," Harry replied in the same tone.

"Are you secretly in love with Malfoy?"

"Yeah, su— wait a minute," Harry said, coming out of his trance. "I just had the strangest conversation."

"Daphne does have a nasty habit of doing that from time to time. What did she say now?"

"The truth, if I understood her right. But I don't know why she would tell me that."

"Can't help you if I don't know what you're talking about, Harry."

"Can you keep a secret, Blaise?" Blaise stared at Harry. "Right, that was stupid of me to ask," he said quickly, in an effort to appease his friend. Blaise merely arched an eyebrow.

"Apparently, her dad wants to find out more about me and told her to be my friend. But now she really wants to be my friend. Or something like that. It was kind of confusing."

"Well I was your friend just because you seemed like an interesting person to be friends with. Plus, I realized right away there would never be a dull moment with you, whether it's being stunned from behind, or attacked by trolls, or—"

"Shut up, Blaise."

The train arrived to take everyone home for the holidays, and Blaise and Harry both boarded it in a much more cheerful mood than they had been in. They sat in one of the compartments; Daphne and Astoria joined them, and the four of them played Exploding Snap and talked about unimportant things. The surprise of the trip was when someone knocked on the door.

"Granger," Harry regarded neutrally.

"Potter," she said sadly. "Can I talk to you?"

"Go ahead," Harry said.

"Outside," she clarified.

Harry glanced at his friends. Blaise shrugged and the Greengrass sisters were avoiding his gaze.

"Alright," Harry said, and he left the compartment.

"I wanted to— apologize," she said quietly. She looked down at her toe as it dug into the carpet. "I don't know what came over me. I just was angry at losing my only friend," belatedly she realized she had probably said too much, but to her credit she continued on bravely, "and I didn't know what to do. I wrote in a diary I found and someone was writing back to me: Tom. He was really sweet and considerate but I found myself not liking you anymore. Then one day I lost the diary and I panicked, but I couldn't find it anywhere. I eventually began to remember the reasons why you were my friend and realized between the two of us, we messed up this relationship fairly badly."

Harry conceded the point that he had screwed up as well and waited patiently for her to continue. But apparently, it was Harry's turn to speak.

"You're right," he said. She almost always was, which was rather annoying, but not the point. "I'm sorry for taking my anger on the lack of mail out on you. I just assumed you lot forgot me and I was bitter at being locked away in my relatives house. I found out Do—someone had been stealing my letters and I'm sure you wrote to me as well. So for what it's worth, I'm sorry too."

Hermione burst into tears and hugged Harry for all he was worth. He stood awkwardly before patting her back and muttering consoling words in her ear. Eventually they broke apart and she looked at him with puffy eyes.

"Would you like to join us?" Harry asked. She nodded, sniffing slightly. Harry reopened the compartment door and led her in.

"Found a stray lioness outside," Harry said with a grin.

"Can we keep her?" Blaise asked cheerfully.

"I dunno..." Harry trailed off, looking at Hermione. She let a grin break across her face.

"I suppose so," Harry conceded. Hermione laughed. The four became five, and they all talked to Hermione to catch up on the first term.

"I'm so sorry about Lily and Tracey," Hermione said softly. The group became somber for a moment.

"It's not your fault, Hermione. It's not like you were the one that attacked them," Blaise said.

Harry froze. In hindsight, if Hermione had the diary she probably was the one attacking people. Although Harry was responsible for Fred and Peeves, of that he was sure.

"Well we'll just have to wait for the Mandrake Potion. They'll be fine." Hermione's tone of voice didn't lend credibility to her statement. But everyone agreed.

"What are your plans for Christmas, Hermione?"

"We're going on a trip to Madrid. My parents have a convention there to attend and after we'll be seeing the sights."

"Madrid has an impressive Wizarding Alley," Daphne said. "It's called Calleja Magia. They have some amazing stores there."

Daphne and Hermione were quickly caught up in discussing Madrid, with Astoria chipping in from time to time.

"So tomorrow we're going shopping for presents," Blaise said.

"Really?"

"Yup, I think we're just heading to Diagon, but I could be wrong."

"Well that will be nice."

"Should be."

Blaise and Harry looked at each other.

"Chess?" they asked simultaneously. Laughing, they broke out the chess set and Harry lost spectacularly yet again.

The rest of the ride went by fairly quickly and before they knew it, King's Cross was staring at them from the windows. They got off the train, trunks in hand, and approached Mrs. Zabini. She gave them a small smile and a portkey, and the three of them were whisked away to Zabini Manor.

Harry suddenly lost his grip on the portkey when they neared the manor and he was slammed forcefully to the ground. He groaned pitifully and waited a minute until Blaise and Mrs. Zabini reappeared, the latter angrily dragging her husband by the earlobe.

"You never keyed Harry into the wards," she said dangerously. It obviously wasn't a question since Harry's current position made it fairly obvious.

"About that..." Mr. Zabini began fearfully. He quickly whipped out his wand and waved it around for a few moments, looking for the right ward. He sent a spell at Harry who couldn't have avoided it if he tried, then returned to the ward, the ghost image of Harry floating into it.

"Up you get, Harry Potter." Mr. Zabini walked over and picked him up off the floor, shaking off the dust. "Sorry about that, I was occupied doing— well it doesn't matter. You're keyed in now. Come in." Harry took a tentative step and managed to pass through unharmed. The same could not be said for Mr. Zabini.

"Care to tell me why you're still doing that?" Mrs. Zabini asked.

"We'll talk later, Helen."

She nodded curtly and ushered the two Slytherins inside.

"Now, we'll be leaving tomorrow to go shopping for presents, so be sure to wake up early. Harry, you'll be in the same room as last time, I trust you remember how to get there?" At Harry's nod, she continued. "Good, I'll just let you all put up your things and go to sleep then. I want you up and ready by nine, nine-thirty at the latest. Is that understood?"

"Yes ma'am," they chorused. She smiled fondly at them. "Get some rest then, it will be a long day."

Harry and Blaise headed up to their rooms and decided sleeping was a good idea. Harry set his alarm and fell asleep.

What seemed like seconds later, he was woken by the alarm, but somehow Harry seemed very well-rested. Even better news was that he had completed organizing his classroom memories. He would now be moving on to memories of his friends at Hogwarts.

"Ready to go?" Mrs. Zabini asked as Blaise and Harry trudged down the stairs. Blaise stifled a yawn and Harry ran his hand along the back of his hair.

"Breakfast," Blaise grunted. Mrs. Zabini, who seemed entirely too cheerful, sent some eggs Blaise's way, along with some sausage

links. Harry was sent a similar plateful and the two quickly devoured the sustenance.

"Let's go then," she said, beaming. She had them gather round a portkey and they landed in the lobby of Gringotts.

"First things first," Mrs. Zabini declared, and the three of them strode to the nearest goblin teller.

"Good afternoon," Mrs. Zabini said by way of greeting. The goblin nodded politely (at least it looked like it was politely) and tapped his fingers on the desk.

"What can I do for you today?"

"We'll need to withdraw funds from the Zabini vault and—" she glanced at Harry who shook his head, signaling that he had enough money for the excursion. "That's it," she finished.

The goblin nodded. "Flitwick will take you." Harry and Blaise stared.

"What the hell?" Blaise mouthed to Harry.

A goblin, whom had absolutely no resemblance to Professor Flitwick beyond their similar stature, appeared and escorted them to the cart, which took them to the vault. Mrs. Zabini went in and grabbed a bagful of galleons and returned. They took the cart back up and Harry swore he heard a dragon.

"Well, let's go." Mrs. Zabini led the way outside to Diagon Alley, only— it wasn't Diagon Alley.

"Where are we?" Harry asked.

"Brisbane, Australia. They have a wonderful shopping center here." Harry and Blaise exchanged grins. Daphne was here too.

"The Greengrasses are here as well, Mum," Blaise said.

"Are they really?" she asked curiously. "I wonder how Alden and Althea are doing. Are they at Mian-jin Alley as well?"

"Is that where we're at?" Harry asked.

"Yes," answered Mrs. Zabini.

"What does Mian-jin mean?" Blaise asked curiously.

"It's in the native tongue I believe, meaning shaped like a spike."

"That's reassuring," muttered Blaise.

"That's also why the Alley is a straight shot with a cul-de-sac at the end, to match the name it was christened with."

"Fascinating," Harry whispered to Blaise dryly. He stifled a laugh.

"I need to go purchase some things. Blaise, here's some money for you, the two of you go off and get what you need and meet me back here in two hours. Our return portkey should leave in three hours, so we'll grab a bite to eat before we return home."

They separated and Harry and Blaise took off for the nearest store. It happened to be a Quidditch store. Harry went and bought a pair of Chaser gloves for Tracey, he knew she had wanted to try out. He would wait until she was healed of course, but it couldn't hurt.

After Blaise finished buying a couple presents the two of them headed off down the street, money bags clinking merrily. They entered a store called Magical Things, which sounded pretty interesting, and it was. Harry found the bulk of his presents in this store.

For Daphne, he found a green stone pendant that reflected light. The shopkeeper commented on the beauty of the piece Harry had selected. It didn't have any magical properties that were recognized, but the shopkeeper said that the stone was dated many centuries back.

Blaise would be the proud owner of a magical dagger, which could be bonded to the user by blood, preventing it from being summoned.

Lily was going to get a pair of dragon earrings that puffed out bursts of fire, which were actually mild heating charms.

Harry decided he would just get Hermione a book. She always liked those. But when he saw the bracelet that was capable of holding one memory at a time he realized that was what she would be getting. It would be very helpful to review a teacher's lecture and he was sure she would love it. It would go a long way in bridging the gap between the two of them.

Astoria was the only one left, and Harry was debating on getting something for the youngest Weasley and the twins.

Harry ended up deciding in favor of the twins, seeing as he had recently petrified one of them, and bought them a thirty second time-turner, although he wasn't sure if it was a good idea, or if it even worked. He decided it would be good to have them on his side so erred on the side of friendship.

As for Ginny Weasley, Harry ended up not getting her anything. The risk that she would read too much into the present was too high, and Harry didn't want to deal with any of that.

Astoria's gift was not found in the Magical Things shop. So when Harry paid for his presents and left, Blaise at his side, the two of them continued down the Alley, looking for more stores.

"How many presents do you have to get?" Harry asked.

"Just my parents and I'll probably get Hermione a book," Blaise replied.

"I think I might get your parents something too," Harry replied.

"Is that all you need? You bought the whole store back there it seemed like," commented Blaise.

"Yeah, and Astoria. I think I'm going to buy Hagrid something too. I feel bad that he's locked away in Azkaban when it's obvious he isn't the Heir." Blaise nodded neutrally.

"So the bookstore next?"

"Sounds good," Harry replied, and the two of them found themselves in a dusty book shop with an elderly wizard manning the register.

"G'day mates. Not often you find youngsters like you in here," commented the old man. "How can I help the two of you today?" he asked.

"Just looking for a couple presents," Blaise answered.

"Anything in particular that you'll be wanting?"

"I found the perfect book for your Dad, Blaise," Harry yelled. He held the cover to a book that read: It's not paranoia when they're really after you. Blaise grinned.

"Good one, Harry." Blaise looked throughout the store and finally settled on Time and Magic, rumored to be first written by Merlin. It was a required read to enter the Unspeakables. "You think Hermione will like this?" Blaise asked.

"It's a book," Harry said with a shrug, as if that answered the question. It did.

"We'll take these," the two of them announced, and they paid for their purchases and left the store.

The next store they entered Blaise found both of his parents' gifts and Harry found something for Mrs. Zabini: a beautiful crystal goblet, decorated with runes that prevented anything from being added to the cup once it was filled. Mr. Zabini would probably appreciate the gift as well, because once he scanned the drink per custom, he would be safe in knowing nothing else could be added to it. He also managed to find a present for Hagrid in the pet store next door.

"You're really buying that for Hagrid? It will kill us!" Blaise yelled shrilly. Harry raised an eyebrow at Blaise's overly dramatic and girlish scream.

"What? No you won't, will you, you beautiful bird?" Harry asked, stroking the feathers of the Augurey he had purchased for Hagrid. It gave a cry, and Blaise nearly cried as well.

"Their cries are death omens, Harry!" he shrieked.

"I'm sure they aren't, Blaise. Don't be so dramatic." Blaise shuddered and glared at Harry. The Augurey ruffled its feathers proudly.

"That leaves me Astoria," Harry said once they left the pet store.

"Oh I wish I had enough money to buy that," they heard a voice pout. Disbelieving, Harry turned and saw Astoria pointing at something in a window to her sister, Daphne.

"Come on Astoria, we need to buy everyone else's presents first."

"But there's only one left!" she cried. Daphne bodily dragged her sister from the shop and took her into a corner for a proper scolding, one could presume.

"Doesn't it make you wonder how they're related?" Blaise asked rhetorically.

But Harry wasn't paying attention. He had just found Astoria's present.

"Come on," Harry said, dragging Blaise into the shop. Harry walked right in, causing everyone to stare at him. Apparently, men didn't normally shop here.

"Ma'am?" Harry asked politely to one of the shop assistants. She turned around and gazed at him questioningly.

"Can I help you?" she asked slowly. "Are you looking for the Magic of Music shop?"

"No, I'm—in the right place. My friend just left and she wanted something in the window. She said it was the last one..." he trailed off. "I wanted to get it for her for Christmas."

The assistant's eyes lit up in comprehension. "Of course, I'll bring it to the register."

When she returned, Harry found himself staring at a very interesting present. It was a watch, with hands on it, multiple hands.

"What is it?" Harry asked curiously.

"It's a watch," she said with a grin. Harry gave her a disgruntled look.

"It shows where different people are relative to where you are. So if I have you on a hand, you're standing right in front of me so your hand would be pointing at the twelve. If you notice there's a spot on the hand that will give you a number, which is the distance from the person on the hand. It can hold four people. In the center will be the owner of the watch. Instructions on designating the owner are included. If you take off the watch, then a hand appears to point towards the owner."

"Sounds pretty useful."

"Does it tell the time?" Blaise asked.

"Yes, digitally," she said, pointing at the time readout they both had missed.

"I'll take it," Harry said again.

He left the shop happy that he found everything he needed. They glanced at Blaise's watch and swore.

"Mum's gonna kill us," Blaise moaned. To make matters worse, it began to rain heavily. The Augurey cried in happiness. Blaise moaned again. The two of them were forty minutes late already. They ran back to Gringotts, having to dodge puddles and people, and made it with about five minutes before the portkey was due to leave.

"I was wondering when you would get back," Mrs. Zabini said calmly. She strode towards the two of them, causing them to take a step backward.

"It's no problem, really," she said. "I found something to keep me occupied waiting for you two. I trust you purchased everything you needed?" Harry and Blaise nodded furiously.

"Good. Then no harm done." She shrunk their packages and they stowed them away in their pockets. Then she held out the portkey and about a minute later the three of them were whisked away back

to Zabini Manor. This time, Harry wasn't ejected and was able to pass through the wards.

"Go put your presents away, and then we'll have lunch."

They did as they were told and enjoyed a hearty lunch. The day ended quickly and the rest of the holidays preceding Christmas flew by. Of course, Harry and Blaise were flying a lot too, so it was no surprise that time seemed to disappear. They had already wrapped their gifts and sent them all off to their friends.

Christmas was upon them in the blink of an eye. Not that they were complaining. Opening presents was a reasonable trade for holidays going by quickly.

They ran downstairs and collected their presents in a pile. Mr. and Mrs. Zabini were content to sit back and watch. Harry groaned when he saw something from Ginny Weasley mixed in his own pile.

Blaise and Harry had sorted through all the presents swiftly, and four stacks had quickly formed, thus creating the seating arrangements for the present opening.

"Ready..." Blaise said, clearly beginning a Christmas tradition of sorts.

"Set..." called Mr. Zabini.

"Go!" cried Mrs. Zabini. The four of them were off.

Harry had received from Hermione a pair of Seeker gloves. Apparently she had faith Harry would reclaim his spot on the team. Blaise had given him a Golden Snitch, engraved with his name on it. Harry let it float behind him as he continued opening presents. Daphne and Astoria had sent the equipment needed to create his own magical instrument. A slab of harmonic wood, magical strings, a dagger to carve the wood, and pins to tie the strings to. It looked like Harry had a new summer project. Ginny's present was a roughly sewn, emerald green sweater with the letter H stitched on the front underneath what looked like a golden snitch. If Harry was being honest it did look somewhat nice. Mr. and Mrs. Zabini had also gotten him a couple of books on Pureblood tradition, which he knew would come in handy.

They headed back outside to just throw snowballs and fly around, but in all honesty, the two boys were just trying to relax before they headed back to Hogwarts and the danger that resided there.

Of course, when dreading something, it has a habit of happening faster than you imagined it would. So even though it seemed term had ended yesterday, they were already returning back to Hogwarts. The break had been a needed one though. Blaise and Harry had grown closer from all the time spent together, and they had regained the energy they would need for the upcoming challenges they would have to face. Harry's Occlumency was also progressing. He had managed to sort through his memories of all his friends and categorize them in his mind. People he didn't know very well he had just grouped together, so now he had moved on to his various adventures that were not classroom related. Those were the last set of memories he had to organize before he would go through the memories Future-Harry had provided, followed by Voldemort's.

But for now, the train took them back to school, and Harry and Blaise shared the compartment once again with Hermione, Daphne, and Astoria. After a quick thank you for the gifts, (Daphne was already wearing her necklace, Hermione her bracelet, and Astoria her watch, which was already set to include Daphne on the minute hand) they locked the door and slept, waiting till they would return to the school once more.

Once they got back to the common room and started getting into the swing of things, the new term began. Harry, Blaise, and Daphne could be found studying at odd hours of the day, and Harry was still trying to keep an eye out for the new owner of the diary. January had turned to February and Harry still hadn't had any luck. There hadn't been any attacks though either. On the bright side, Snape's favorite chocolate was discovered: a predictable slab of Honeyduke's finest. Harry bribed a third year to buy him some, and Harry prepared phase one of his prank.

The Slytherin Quidditch team had played Hufflepuff, and in a wild match, Cedric Diggory had caught the snitch moments after Flint scored, ending the game in a tie. Harry's good luck had finally paid off, and Flint had reinstated him onto the team for a trial basis only. Malfoy was supposedly injured and unable to play, although Harry had a feeling that had been the Slytherin Quidditch team's doing.

Harry now found himself putting Hermione's Christmas present to good use, and was practicing three nights a week. Valentine's Day showed up and proved to be a very eventful day. It started with Lockhart annoying the entire school. Harry was biding his time, Lockhart would get what was coming to him soon. At breakfast in the Great Hall, lavish pink decorations had been spread out by the pedophile himself. His status was further confirmed when he thanked the students for his forty-six Valentine's cards. Harry was just thankful Lily hadn't sent him one as well. She wasn't able to, for obvious reasons, but just the same, it was a comforting thought. Lockhart, his flamboyant pink robes making him an eye sore, announced to the masses that dwarves, of all things, would be delivering messages throughout the day. They were dressed like Cupid and looked anything but.

Harry of course, was fated to have a valentine delivered to him by the damn dwarf. He tried to get away but he was pinned and wasn't fast enough to grab his wand on the way to Potions, of all classes.

"Right," the dwarf called, his voice carrying across the hall. It seemed all of Hogwarts paused to watch. He noticed Ginny Weasley prominently and was prepared to curse her halfway to Timbuktu. To think he had ever worn the damn sweater...

"His eyes are as green as a fresh pickled toad,

His hair is as dark as a blackboard.

I wish he were mine, he's really divine,

The hero who conquered the Dark Lord."

Harry wanted to glare at anyone who dared quote the poem at him, and his eyes caught Ginny's. She looked terrified and hopeful at the same time. An unlikely hero emerged from the crowd.

"Ah, sorry Harry. Couldn't resist a prank," said Astoria with a grin. "Thanks for being such a good sport," and she kissed him on the cheek, leaving everyone to laugh and they all left the hallway. She leaned near his ear, "You're welcome, we both know I could write poetry better than that. Looks like you have a not so secret admirer," and she glanced at Ginny Weasley. The redhead looked furious and

heartbroken. She seemed to be a walking contradiction at the moment. She huffed and ran back the way she came,

bursting into tears, although if they were of sadness or anger was anybody's guess. Harry gave Astoria a hug, lingering a little longer than necessary, and thanked her. Then he headed to the nightmare class that was Potions.

At the end of class, Harry stayed behind and gave Snape the slab of Honeydukes chocolate.

"Here sir," Harry said, grinning broadly. "I wanted you to have this. Consider it a token of my appreciation for everything you've done for me in the past."

Beaming, Harry walked out, leaving a confused Severus Snape in his wake. The sheer brilliance of Harry's prank had been that Snape would assume, after everything Harry said, that he had done something to the chocolate. Harry had not touched it. So Snape's favorite chocolate would be taunting him, daring him to eat it. He would never find anything wrong with it, but know there must be something evil there because it was from Potter. Harry congratulated himself on a prank well executed. Now, to take care of those billowing robes...

One day in late February, he did find someone that helped verify what he already knew was true, concerning the attacks.

"Err, hello," Harry said, startled at walking through a ghost. He had been looking for the girls near one of the bathrooms and a ghost had appeared, forcing Harry to walk through her.

"You're a boy," the ghost observed.

"Well-spotted," Harry said acidly, still rattled from walking through a ghost. "Who are you?"

"Ooooh, not very many people ask me that. I'm Myrtle!" the ghost said excitedly, blushing as she did so. Although Harry wasn't sure how a ghost could possibly blush...

"Brilliant, I'm Harry. Listen, I've got to be going now—"

"Oh but you're the fourth boy this year to come to my toilet. I never really talked to the first three."

"Who are you talking about?"

"They had red hair and were making a mess in my bathroom, brewing some sludge looking potion."

"Polyjuice," Harry muttered. "You said they had red hair?"

"Yes," gushed Myrtle. "Although yours looks a lot nicer."

"Thanks," Harry said absently. So that settled that question. It had been the Weasleys who had snuck into the Slytherin common room and questioned Harry and Malfoy.

"Have any other boys ever visited you, Myrtle?"

"Only one," she squealed. "It was when I died," she whispered dramatically. "I had been crying in my toilet and heard a boy. I looked out and saw these big, yellow eyes. Then, I died."

"You must have seen a basilisk," commented Harry. "The person that killed you was Tom Riddle. He had released the basilisk, which is this great big snake that kills you if you look at it. Where did you say you saw it?" Harry asked.

"By the sink," Myrtle said. Harry glanced towards the sink and heard movement. Transfixed, he stared as it moved apart and found himself in the same predicament Myrtle had been in fifty years ago.

He was staring into a pair of big, yellow eyes.

Chapter 16: Vantage Point

Harry found himself staring into a pair of big, yellow eyes: the eyes of a basilisk. Harry heard hissing in Parseltongue; someone was directing it. Harry found himself mesmerized by the eyes. Somewhere in the back of his mind he knew he should be dead. But he wasn't. The basilisk cocked its head at Harry.

"Tom Riddle?" it hissed.

"What?" Harry said, confused.

"Tom Riddle isss the only living human who isss immune to my ssstare." it said matter-of-factly. Then it paused, as if realizing something. "The bloodline of my creator, Sssalazar Ssslytherin, is immune to my ssstare. Are you Tom Riddle'sss child, then?"

Hissing from below the sink became frantic.

"We ssshall ssspeak sssome other time."

The great snake retreated back from the way it came, and Harry felt compelled to leave the bathroom. He did so, and moments later found himself back in the common room.

"I know where the Chamber of Secrets is," he whispered to himself, staring blankly around the empty room. And a basilisk wants to speak with me. Maybe I can gain a new ally. Not everyone can claim to be allies with a basilisk.

"I should keep this quiet," Harry resolved. At least until I discover the owner of the diary. I want to be the only who can communicate with the King of Snakes.

Harry did have a sinking feeling in his stomach that the snake believed him to be Riddle or his descendent. Was it because he was a Parselmouth? Or because Salazar "fathered" the great snake?

These questions would have to wait until the next time he met the basilisk. Harry resolved to find the owner of the diary before he made his next move. He wanted to be the only person involved in the conversation and not have it cut short. His search became a priority, and he was nearly consumed by it.

"Harry," Blaise said, waving his hand in front of Harry's face. It had been nine long weeks since Harry's encounter with the basilisk, and Harry had hardly been eating or sleeping. He had been observing each of the students of Hogwarts and had begun categorizing them, trying to find who was acting out of the ordinary. He needed to discover the owner.

"What?" Harry whispered.

"You need to have a good meal and get some sleep. The last Quidditch match is tomorrow."

"Do we still have a chance at winning?"

"For the fifth time, yes. We just need to win by three hundred and forty."

"Against Gryffindor," Harry said in a monotone voice.

Blaise grimaced. "Yeah."

"Lovely," Harry muttered.

"At least most of their team is petrified," Blaise commented. "They've lost two Chasers and a Beater. That's nearly half."

Harry nodded solemnly. One of those was due to him.

"Hey, you're alive," said Daphne as she took the seat on Harry's other side. They were having dinner in the Great Hall, at least Blaise and Daphne were. Harry wasn't eating but was instead focusing on the Gryffindors. He had already swept through the other houses, and had concluded that none of them had the diary. He was currently evaluating the first year Gryffindors. He took three days for each house year. It was already the last week in April and Harry was frustrated. If a Gryffindor didn't have the diary then he had literally wasted twelve weeks of his life. But for three more weeks at least, he would still persevere.

"Only just," Blaise commented, spearing a piece of chicken with his fork. "Eat Harry," he said, thrusting the meat into Harry's face and

waving it menacingly. Harry grudgingly ate it and grabbed a piece of bread to appease his friends.

"You really haven't been yourself lately. You've just been staring at people and not really focusing," Blaise said worriedly.

"It looks like you've been doing Occlumency," commented Daphne.

Harry blinked.

"You have, haven't you?" Daphne accused. "But what have you been doing?" she said slowly. Then she blinked as well. "You've been categorizing all the Hogwarts students, haven't you?"

"Yeah, sure," Harry said in a non-committal tone.

Daphne fingered the necklace Harry had given her for Christmas. "How has your Occlumency been coming along?"

Harry turned away from the Gryffindors he had been sizing up and fixed Daphne with a penetrating stare. Daphne unconsciously shivered underneath it.

"I'm organizing the memories still. I've moved on to people. Then I'll have to do non-classroom related events and I should be finished. That's the biggest of the lot."

Harry turned back to evaluating the first years. He considered Ginny Weasley, but decided that she probably hadn't taken it. It would be ironic, as she had been the original owner of the diary the first time around, but she seemed— normal.

"Let's go," Harry said abruptly. He stood up and Blaise and Daphne followed suit. They headed back to the common room and the three went upstairs to Harry and Blaise's room. Harry cast a locking charm and a silencing charm on the door. Blaise and Daphne made themselves comfortable— this promised to be an interesting conversation.

"So I know what is attacking everyone," Harry said bluntly.

"What?"

"How?"

"Why?"

Harry smirked. "It's a basilisk." Daphne and Blaise both went wide-eyed. Apparently they were well-versed in magical creatures.

"It's by means of a diary. It possesses the person writing in it and enables them to free the basilisk to attack. I don't know who has it. Hermione used to though."

"Well we need to find that out," Blaise said quickly.

"That's why you've been looking at everyone," Daphne said, comprehension dawning in her eyes.

"Yes," Harry answered. "It's got to be one of the Gryffindors. I don't think it's anyone from the other houses."

"But why would they attack their own members?" Blaise asked.

"The diary has— changed hands a few times."

"How do you know all this?" Daphne asked.

Harry grimaced. "You had the diary didn't you?" Blaise asked astutely. Caught out, Harry nodded.

"You didn't— attack anyone— did you?" Daphne asked.

"Fred and Peeves, I think," Harry answered. Daphne gave him a brief hug.

"At least it was a Gryffindor," Blaise said consolingly. Harry forced a laugh. "Pity it wasn't Malfoy..."

Harry really did laugh. "Yeah."

"So what do we need to do?"

"Shouldn't we tell someone about the basilisk?"

Harry realized he would have to give up another one of his secrets.
"No. I think I can get the basilisk on my side."

"How the hell would you do that?" Blaise asked.

"I'm a parselmouth." Daphne looked at Harry in surprise. Blaise smirked.

"Wicked," he said. Harry snorted.

"Are you really?" Daphne asked.

"No, I'm just kidding. Yes of course, why would I lie about that?"

"You know that's the mark of a Dark Wizard," commented Blaise idly.

"So is being sorted into Slytherin," Harry shot back.

"Touché," Blaise said with a grin.

"So if you can help me with the Gryffindors, we can hopefully figure out who has the diary. I just started on the first years, so you two take the second years. Just look for abnormal characteristics, or see if they seem to not be paying attention to their surroundings. Observe them for about three days, then move on to the fourth years," Harry said.

"I don't really know how to explain it, but when I observe for a couple of days, I can tell whether or not they are under the diary's influence," he finished. Harry supposed it might be because he could recognize Riddle's influence, but then again, he wasn't so sure.

"Consider it done, Harry," Blaise replied, snapping off a salute. Daphne smirked.

The next morning brought the Quidditch Final, and any thoughts of diaries fled Harry's mind as he focused on his one task: catch the snitch after they were up by at least one hundred and ninety.

The locker room was completely silent as the Slytherin Quidditch team entered it. Flint stared menacingly at each member of his team, angry they were in this predicament.

"We've got a couple of lucky breaks, since they're missing almost half their team. We're going to take the other half out of the game. We need one hundred and ninety points before you grab the snitch, Potter. Anything less and you won't start next season. I'll give it back to Malfoy."

"Understood, Captain," Harry said. Apparently it sounded too cheerful because he was sent an icy glare from Flint. Harry ignored it.

"Let's go out there and pound them. That cup is ours."

The team trudged onto the field and flew up, ready to take on the Gryffindors. The school had all banded against Slytherin, predictably, but it didn't matter. Lee Jordan began his biased commentary almost immediately, and Madam Hooch released the balls, letting the game begin.

Harry flew lazily around the pitch; he only had to prevent the snitch from being caught until they had the big lead. That was easier said than done. Their beaters were doing their job well, and had already removed the remaining first string Chaser from the game with a fractured arm. She would be out for at least forty-five minutes. Hopefully the game would be over by then.

The Gryffindor team became desperate; they pulled a Beater off to help Chasing, but that wasn't a very good idea. Their remaining Beater, George, was good, but he wasn't unbeatable. Especially when two bludgers were hit at him simultaneously. He went down fast, and the Slytherins seemed to have the game under control. Wood was playing phenomenally though, and the Slytherins only had a fifty point lead.

The Slytherin Chasers just weren't good enough. Hopefully, with Flint graduating, Harry would be able to take over as Chaser. He could let Malfoy have the Seeker position and actually help the team win.

Katie Bell returned to the game and they were still only up by one hundred. Gryffindor started to rally back. But Flint started playing out of his mind, matching Wood play for play. Soon, the lead reached one hundred and fifty when the Gryffindor Seeker, Ginny Weasley, flew towards the snitch. Harry took off after her, cursing, and knew

he had to keep her off of it until they had their lead. Rain started to fall, which didn't help matters any.

Flint scored again, leaving them needing three more goals, and Harry put on a burst of speed, blocking the redhead and knocking her sideways. He continued to fly after the snitch to keep it in sight and end the game quickly. Pucey put one in while he had been fighting with Weasley and they were now down to two goals. Harry continued eyeing the snitch when out of nowhere, the damned redhead flew from the ground and headed straight for it.

Harry swore and took off after it, hearing everyone boo in the stands. Flint had scored again. One more goal to go. Harry saw his Chasers regain possession and he tore off after the snitch. Weasley put her hand out to grab and Harry threw his hand at hers to knock it away. The snitch landed in his hand right after Flint had released the Quaffle. Harry couldn't have timed his catch better.

The only problem was, Wood couldn't have timed his save better. He tipped it up and right, making it bounce off the ring before falling away. Harry tried to let go of the snitch but Hooch had already seen him make the catch.

"Slytherin wins!" she yelled. Harry flew back down and threw his broom angrily into the mud. Flint followed up right behind him.

"What did I tell you about catching the snitch, Potter?" he asked dangerously.

"Well if you could learn how to make a shot," Harry fired back.

"You won't be playing Seeker next year, Potter, count on it," he whispered angrily.

"You're graduating, Flint. You won't be captain anymore." Flint's eyes glittered maliciously and he walked off. Harry hoped the idiot didn't get held back a year and follow through on his promise. Harry didn't mind trying to play Chaser, but now he wasn't so sure. Blaise and Daphne patted him on the back and the three of them headed back inside.

The next few days the trio could be found observing the Gryffindors, trying to detect something out of the ordinary. Daphne and Blaise

were slightly confused as to what exactly they were looking for, so they ended up taking twice as long. Harry had already moved passed the first years and the third years before they moved on to the fifth years. The beginning of May arrived and Harry still wasn't any further along the trail of the diary owner, and he was running out of suspects.

Another week went by and Harry decided to double check the second and fourth years, leaving Blaise and Daphne to handle the sixth years. The three of them checked out the seventh years together but there was nothing. There had been no further attacks though, and Harry was beginning to wonder if someone had confiscated the diary from him and destroyed it. He glanced at the sixth years on a whim and began to look over them. Harry didn't have much time though, because the very next day his hand was forced.

"There was another attack," Blaise said shortly when Harry had arrived to dinner. Daphne looked quite pale as well.

"Who was it?" Harry asked.

"Percy Weasley and—" Daphne let out a strangled sob, "Astoria," finished Blaise grimly.

"His skeleton will lie in the Chamber forever," Blaise quoted, sounding oddly detached. It was the only way to not show any emotion. Astoria had grown a bit on the three Slytherins, especially with two of their former group incapacitated.

"Damn," swore Harry violently. "Wait— did you say his skeleton?"

"Yeah, that's what was written on the wall." Blaise led them back to the place of the first attack and the words shone ominously in blood.

"Then what happened to Astoria?" Harry asked urgently. Daphne made another strangled sob.

"We don't know. She either was kidnapped by whoever has the diary— or she was the one who kidnapped Percy and is the one in possession of the diary." Harry did not like those odds. It seemed like Astoria was the one who brought Percy down to the Chamber—

the writing on the wall seemed to reinforce that statement. But how did Harry miss that?

"The teachers are organizing another search," Blaise said.

"You know where the Chamber is right? You can save them!" Daphne said abruptly.

Harry began running towards Myrtle's bathroom rapidly. Daphne and Blaise looked at each other then ran to follow but they ran right into the one person they would have hoped to have avoided.

Harry knew Daphne was right. He had to save Astoria; he had to prevent the diary from killing her. He took off at a run and left Blaise and Daphne to follow if they chose to do so. He finally made it to Myrtle's bathroom but his friends weren't behind him. He paused to catch his breath and give them an opportunity to catch up but they didn't. Harry didn't let it bother him and after a rapid "hello" to Myrtle hissed "open" to the sink.

Harry glanced down and saw a very long tunnel and he was unable to see the bottom.

"Stairs?" Harry hissed questioningly. Unfortunately, nothing happened. Obviously there was a different password to use to make the route downward any easier and Harry didn't know what it was. He was hit by a bit of a brilliant idea though and transfigured a busted pipe into a rough looking broom. He threw a flying charm at it, though his flying charms weren't very good— a problem he would rectify when he was finished with this ordeal— and without further ado hopped on and flew down the opening.

The tunnel he flew into seemed to twist and turn endlessly. Harry knew he must be a couple miles below the school, easily. Different pipes branched off in other directions—probably pipes the basilisk used to maneuver around the school— but Harry kept his course fixed in the larger pipe he was flying through. He dodged different openings and kept his head from hitting the roof and his feet from scraping the bottom as he flew better than he had at the last Quidditch match. Only the snitch he was chasing now was far more precious, and yet again his hand was forced; he couldn't wait for his team to surmount a huge lead.

Harry swore when his flying charm gave out and the broom fell below him, with him still on it. He hit the floor of the pipe hard and rolled in a painful manner before the end finally appeared and he landed in a tangled, dignified heap on the wet floor of a long, dark tunnel that had plenty of room to stand in.

Harry stood up, wincing as his right leg screamed in protest, and limped forward towards his destination.

He had to stop countless times to catch his breath and once spit out blood. His leg apparently wasn't the only thing injured. His repertoire of healing spells was severely depleted: another area of magic he would have to delve into once this mess was dealt with.

His pace quickened when he used one hand against the wall to help him walk faster. His right arm seemed to be hanging limp as well. He looked through his memories and remembered a spell to heal it.

Right when he cast the spell he knew he screwed up. His arm felt like it was deflating. Harry quickly realized the severity of the mistake he had made. He hadn't fixed the bones in his arm— he had removed them. Harry cursed Lockhart's name repeatedly.

Harry kept his wand in his left hand and was forced to slow down. He didn't worry about closing his eyes— one way or another the basilisk recognized Tom Riddle in Harry— whether it was his Parseltongue ability or the soul piece nestled inside was irrelevant at the moment.

As he limped through the Chamber he came across the skin the basilisk had most recently shed. It was longer than Harry would have imagined. Even though the eyes couldn't kill him, Harry would still have to be wary. He kept his wand out and hurried forward, gritting his teeth through the pain and ignoring the flapping sounds his boneless hand seemed to make. He came to another open passage with a solid wall at the end. Harry approached cautiously keeping his eyes open.

Two serpents were carved into the wall, their bodies entwined, eyes set with emeralds that glinted from their own inner light, illuminating the darkness surrounding Harry. He steeled himself for the confrontation and hissed "open," one more time. The wall parted

and Harry gathered courage that would have made a Gryffindor proud, and entered the Chamber of Secrets.

"Careful there, Mr. Zabini, Miss Greengrass." The two of them looked up in annoyance. They were facing Gilderoy Lockhart and he was levitating a trunk behind him.

"Aren't you going to help find the Chamber?" Blaise asked.

"And save my sister?" continued Daphne.

"I was unaware that your sister was taken, Miss Greengrass. I am terribly sorry for your loss."

"So are you just leaving then?" Blaise asked again.

"Prior commitment, it is very regrettable. I sincerely wish I could do more," Lockhart said, showing a sorrowful expression.

"So you're running away?" Blaise asked. "How Slytherin of you," commented Blaise. Lockhart looked mildly shocked. Blaise wasn't sure if Lockhart took the comment as a compliment.

"I wouldn't say that, Mr. Zabini. Merely—"

"Looking after your own interests first," answered Daphne. "I can respect that. I'm just surprised you're not taking advantage of the situation to further cement your heroic status. After all the things you've done in your books, I would think that saving someone from the fabled Chamber of Secrets would make you a legend." Blaise looked at Daphne in awe. She was good.

Lockhart seemed to inflate from the praise. But it was easy to tell he was terrified. "Well, you see, about the things in my books—"

"Surely they were accurate reflections of your accomplishments," Blaise ventured, knowing full well they weren't. Lockhart's Slytherin side was commendable, that was certain, but he did not have the ability to back it up. He was merely a skilled manipulator, and Slytherins were able to recognize that.

"Books can be misleading—"

Blaise and Daphne smirked. "You wrote them," they argued.

Lockhart seemed to wilt under their intense gaze.

Daphne began to think furiously. They had already lost enough time as it was. They needed to find the Chamber. Harry was too far ahead of them. There was only one other person she knew of that knew where the Chamber of Secrets was. But it would be tough. Thankfully, she had enough skill in Legilimency that she thought she could pull it off.

"So you've been taking credit for everyone else's accomplishments. Your only real accomplishments are your Memory Charms," Blaise accused, shaking Daphne out of her thoughts.

"They are quite good," Lockhart said brightly. "Speaking of which..." Lockhart pulled his wand out, but Daphne and Blaise were faster. "Stupefy!" The two curses combined managed to lift Lockhart off his feet and slam him into the door. Blood dripped onto the floor from the back of his head. Blaise and Daphne both winced. Blaise felt like Lockhart deserved what he got. Trying to Memory charm them. Honestly!

"Take him into the bathroom and leave him there. We need to find the Chamber. Harry's gone but Hermione went into the Chamber when she had the diary. I'm going to try and read her mind and see if I can find it."

Blaise nodded. Daphne took off towards the Gryffindor common room. The last thing she heard as she turned the corner was "Locomotor mortis."

Harry entered the interior of the Chamber of Secrets. He walked past serpentine stone pillars, acutely aware of how long it was taking him to walk. Despite himself he felt slightly awed. He was standing in the Chamber of Secrets, built by the founder of his house. Salazar Slytherin had stood in this spot. Salazar Slytherin's statue was looking right at him eerily. A sobering thought— Voldemort, or Tom Riddle, had been here as well.

Harry looked at the base of Slytherin's statue and was hit by an even more sobering thought: Riddle was here now.

Harry saw two bodies lying on the floor of the Chamber; Astoria and Percy. He walked up, determined to rescue Astoria, but kept his eyes open. He didn't see Tom Riddle but that didn't mean he wasn't here. He kept his wand firmly in his left hand but realized it would be hard to shake her awake. He glanced at Percy and knew right away something was wrong. His face was white as marble, his body cold to the touch. He checked for a pulse and there was one, but something seemed wrong. Percy Weasley had served his purpose to Tom Riddle and had been disposed of, but the boy still lived.

Harry pulled open his eyelids and realized the horrible truth: Percy Weasley was breathing, but he wasn't alive. Blank, soulless eyes stared back at him. Percy Weasley had lost his soul.

Astoria, on the other hand, seemed to be in better shape. Nothing seemed to be wrong with her, except she wasn't conscious: a stunning spell, or the imperious curse perhaps.

"Harry Potter," a voice called. Wand in hand, Harry turned and found himself facing Tom Riddle, the wand that formerly belonged to Percy Weasley pointed at his chest.

"Tom Riddle," Harry greeted. The tall black haired boy nodded coolly, staring at Harry curiously. Harry wondered where the diary had gotten off to.

"It was very interesting, meeting you for the first time. I felt such a strong— attraction to you. Surely you know what I'm talking about."

"Never pegged you as someone keeping for the other team, Riddle." Riddle glared angrily.

"You know what I meant, I'm sure. Especially when I found myself in your mind, speaking to my future self. Imagine my surprise, when I realized a part of me existed in you."

"Did you learn anything?" Harry asked.

"Enough to know that you are a danger to me. Imperio!" Caught off guard, and injured to boot, Harry was hit by the curse. He was ordered to turn around and did so. He was told to pick up the diary, and Harry wholeheartedly agreed with that order, and did as he was asked. Once it was in his pocket, he began fighting the curse in

earnest. But he was too weak from blood loss, fatigue, and the extra presence of Voldemort in his mind to throw it off. Riddle escorted Harry back to the entrance to the Chamber.

"Lift," hissed Riddle. In Harry's subconscious, he groaned. The way down could have been so much easier. Apparently Slytherin— or Riddle when he went to school here— had installed a lift. The ride up was a lot faster and more comfortable, though Harry was too distracted to notice. He followed Riddle's instructions to leave the bathroom and they exited, turning the corner at the end of the hallway, when they ran into the person that was at once both Harry and Tom Riddle's greatest ally— and worst enemy.

"Locomotor mortis," Blaise incanted. Lockhart floated up feebly, and then fell back down. Blaise grinned.

"Mobilicorpus," Blaise said, and Lockhart floated into the air. Blaise led him at wandpoint, and headed for a bathroom. He had to stop twice to avoid teachers, not wanting them to see what he was doing. In his haste to avoid getting caught, he found himself a corridor away from Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. Grinning evilly, Blaise turned the corner. Had he been paying attention, he would have seen Harry at the opposite end of the corridor, but instead he had taken great care to bang Lockhart into the wall as he turned the corner, and missed the chance. So he led Lockhart into the bathroom and deposited him on the floor, before heading to Daphne at the Gryffindor common room.

Daphne had headed straight to the Gryffindor common room, getting there faster than she thought she could possibly have managed on a normal day. The castle seemed to be aiding her in her quest. The Fat Lady, the portrait she had discovered hid the entrance to the Gryffindor common room, swung open for her on its own accord. With no time to question the strange move, she ran inside.

"Greengrass?" George Weasley called hoarsely. "What are you doing here?"

"I need to speak to Granger."

"I'm here," Hermione called. Daphne grabbed the girl by the arm and led her upstairs to the girl's dormitories, dodging George on the way. He ran after her, calling after her asking for information about Percy

and Astoria. He ran up the stairs right before Hermione and Daphne had reached the top. An alarm went off and the stairs turned into a slide. Daphne and Hermione leaped gracefully, leaving George to tumble back down to the common room floor.

"I don't have time to explain, Astoria's in trouble and Harry went after her. He went to the Chamber but we don't know how to get there. You do. You've been there before."

"I don't remember anything though," Hermione said.

"Just relax. I'm going to read your mind."

"You can do that?" she shrieked.

"I'll explain later, just relax." Daphne counted to three. Hermione nodded and took a deep breath, before exhaling slowly. Daphne locked eyes with Hermione and the Gryffindor nodded. "Legilimens," Daphne said. Daphne began to delve quickly into Hermione's mind. Thankfully, the girl was organized. She looked for blank spots in her memory, holes that seemed to be ripped out. She called out for memories of a basilisk, or the Chamber.

She finally found what she was looking for after an undeterminable amount of time. A part of Hermione's mind seemed to be blocked off from the rest of her. Daphne approached cautiously. She cast a vanishing spell, low-powered, and the wall vanished. There were a few memories present. Daphne stepped towards one and watched as Hermione put the diary in her pocket and began walking. She headed out, down the corridor, and Daphne traced her path to Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. Once inside, Hermione looked at the sink and made a strange hissing noise. Then, to Daphne's surprise, the sink moved underground and revealed a passage that twisted downwards.

That was all that Daphne needed. She replayed the hissing noise over and over in her head, making sure she could mimic it, before pulling from Hermione's mind. The girl had a glazed over expression on her face.

"Thanks," Daphne said breathlessly. "I'll explain later." And she ran off, leaving for the first time, a clueless Hermione Granger behind her.

Daphne slid down the banister since the stairs were still a slide and had to be reset by Gryffindor's Head of House, whom was preoccupied at the moment, and ran out of the common room amid yells from the Weasleys. She left the portrait hole and ran into Blaise.

"We've got to go Moaning Myrtle's bathroom, that's where the entrance is," Daphne explained, then ran, leaving Blaise to follow her.

"How ironic," Blaise said, as he ran after her.

They reached the bathroom in record time.

"Why is Lockhart here?" Daphne asked.

"I thought it'd be funny to throw him in a girl's bathroom. Bit ironic that we had to come back here." Daphne shook her head in amusement before turning to the task at hand.

She approached the sink. After three experimental hisses, she managed to get it open, eliciting a gasp of shock from Blaise, and then jumped in. Blaise sighed and jumped in after her.

Severus Snape was not caught off guard very often. As a matter of fact, discounting twice in the past two years, it had been decades before he had truly been surprised by something. Two years ago, Harry Potter was sorted into Slytherin. Suffice it to say that Severus had the power of speech flee from him for a few moments. The second time was at Valentine's, when the cursed spawn of Potter had given him chocolate. Not just any chocolate— Honeydukes' best slab of chocolate, a personal favorite of one Severus Snape.

Now, Severus was not a fool. Obviously Potter had done something to the chocolate. He was not fooled by the still sealed paper. He cast one diagnostic charm after another. He refused to give up. The chocolate would constantly torment him, lying innocently on his personal desk. The marauders seemed to still haunt him to this day. Potter was merely continuing the tradition of torturing him. But everything turned up negative.

Mind lost in the Muggle methods of coating chocolate with some sort of fluid that would cause bodily discomfort, Severus walked right into

the brat who was causing him such trouble. But that was not what surprised him. As a matter of fact, Severus had smirked gleefully; Potter was about to have a very long detention. No, what surprised him was the boy behind Potter, directing him: a sixteen year old Tom Riddle, who would one day become Lord Voldemort.

"My Lord," Severus said in surprise. He swept into a short bow. Riddle looked into Severus's eyes and perused his surface thoughts. He allowed his allegiance to Lord Voldemort to show, as well as his name and position and other inconsequential thoughts, prominently among them his hatred for Harry Potter, since chocolate was what he had last been thinking of.

"Severus," Riddle said, trying the name on his tongue. "It is good to see you still remain loyal to me."

"Always, my Lord."

"I want you to do something for me."

"How may I be of service?" Severus asked, but inside his mind was churning. This could prove problematic.

"One moment, I do not want Potter to remember this conversation. Nor the last hour."

"With pleasure," Severus sneered. "Obliviate." Harry's eyes glazed over. "Stupefy," Severus said, and Harry Potter was stunned and left on the floor.

Riddle locked eyes with Severus and the potions master realized with a start that Riddle had vanished.

Blaise and Daphne fell through the twisting and turning pipe for ages before they finally landed on the wet floor. They stood up abruptly, wands out, eyes sweeping across the open area.

"Keep your eyes lowered. If we make eye contact with the basilisk, it's the last thing we'll do. Just because Harry wants it as an ally doesn't mean it won't kill us."

"At least not yet," agreed Blaise. The two of them walked warily through the Chamber, and Daphne let out a shriek and jumped into

Blaise's arms when they passed the skin the snake had shed. Blaise let out a nervous laugh and they continued onward. After an endless amount of walking, they reached the solid wall with the snakes staring back at them. Daphne made the same hissing noise again and managed it after the second try this time, and the two entered the Chamber proper.

They walked slowly, eyeing their surroundings, ready to close their eyes at a moment's notice. Whatever they expected, it wasn't what was waiting for them. Whether it had been Harry talking to a basilisk, fighting it, dueling the Heir, or limping out with Astoria, none of that happened. Harry wasn't even there. Astoria was though.

"Astoria!" Daphne yelled. Abandoning all pretense of cautiousness, she ran to her sister's aid. Astoria didn't move or respond at all. Blaise walked up slower, eyeing the Chamber with distrust, and when he reached Daphne, motioned her to move. The poor girl was frantic. Had the situation been less dire, Blaise would have found humor in Daphne losing her composure so badly. Blaise tried to revive her.

"Enervate," he said softly. Thankfully, it worked. Astoria blinked her eyes and looked at her sister and Blaise.

"Well, I definitely didn't expect you two to rescue me," Astoria said with a nervous laugh.

"Were you hoping for a Prince?" Blaise asked dryly. Thankfully, none of them knew Snape's ancestry; otherwise the bad joke would have become quite disgusting.

Astoria deigned the question beneath her to answer.

"We should get out of here. Do you know what happened to the basilisk?"

"Not really," Astoria said. "I just remember Percy Weasley casting the imperious on me. He led me down here and stunned me. That's the last thing I remember." As one, the three glanced to where Astoria was pointing. Percy Weasley's soulless body lay on the floor next to them.

"There's nothing we can do for him," Blaise said in a clinical voice.

"We'll just leave him in the bathroom then."

"With Lockhart," Blaise said in a slightly evil tone of voice.

"You certainly hold a grudge against him, Blaise," Daphne commented. "Any reason?"

"Not one you'd believe..." Blaise muttered. That was a secret that would stay with him until the day he died. Or at the very least until one of two people asked him. And Daphne was not one of them.

The three of them brought Percy out of the Chamber and went back the way they had come.

"Let's say the basilisk was killed. Harry wanted it to be his ally. So if he did succeed there, then we can keep it a secret. Of course, if it didn't want to ally with him then he probably killed it," Blaise said reasonably.

"You have a lot of faith in Harry, Blaise."

"That's rich, coming from you, Astoria. Didn't you expect him to come save you?" Astoria didn't bother to answer.

"I wonder what happened to him though," Daphne said absently.

"We'll find out shortly, I'm sure," Blaise said. They got to the end of the tunnel and realized they didn't have a way up.

"Um... Anybody have any ideas?"

"Let's try levitating someone up there," suggested Astoria.

"Too far up. Can we conjure some brooms or something?" Daphne said.

"Don't know how," muttered Blaise angrily. "Wait, what if we cast the flying charm, but on ourselves, instead of a broom?"

"Can you even cast the spell?" Daphne asked curiously.

"Of course. I had to do it from time to time to help my father with—never mind. I can do it."

"I'll cast it on you two first. You can carry Weasley between the two of you. I'll bring up the rear."

Blaise cast the spells and in short order, the three of them were flying up the pipes, Percy Weasley being carried between them. When they finally reached the bathroom, they flew out and landed on the floor. The sink closed on its own accord, and they left Percy near Lockhart's body. They fled the bathroom after that with one backward glance at Lockhart, who for some reason seemed to have gotten paler than normal, and was sitting on red tile, when the rest of the bathroom had white tile on the floor.

As the bathroom door shut behind them, they heard Moaning Myrtle scream.

Albus Dumbledore was not having a good day. He was actually having a very bad day, and no amount of lemon drops could change that. The Weasleys were currently seated in his office, distraught over their son Percy disappearing, and he had recently discovered the absence of Astoria Greengrass as well. Tom Riddle was up to something, but Dumbledore knew for a fact that Riddle was in Albania. He didn't have all the pieces to the puzzle yet, and it was annoying him to no end.

He had sent the ghosts out to look for secret passages that could possibly lead to the Chamber of Secrets, but nothing had been revealed yet. The teachers had all reported back to him that they had yet to find anything except for Severus. Severus had yet to report back, and Albus was troubled. Suddenly, he felt a presence approaching him and breathed a sigh of relief. He looked up, expecting to see his potions professor, but was instead greeted by a distraught ghost.

"Myrtle," Dumbledore said pleasantly. "What brings you to my office?"

The Weasleys were staring straight ahead, ignoring everything going on, so Dumbledore paid them no mind for the moment.

"Headmaster, you need to come to my bathroom." The urgency in his former student's voice propelled Dumbledore to act faster than belayed his years. The Weasleys remained staring blankly forward and a hasty apology was received by an absent wave of Arthur Weasley's hand.

He arrived at Myrtle's bathroom, setting a new record time, which had been occurring a lot that evening, and was appalled at what he saw. He levitated the bodies of Percy Weasley and Gilderoy Lockhart to the Hospital Wing, and upon his return, noticed where Lockhart had been lying was now a pool of the professor's blood. He walked back out, shaking his head at the mess his school had fallen into, when he fell to the floor himself. To make matters worse, he had stumbled over the body of Harry Potter.

Thankfully, Dumbledore recognized the signs of a stunning spell and quickly reversed it.

"Harry, can you hear me?" Dumbledore asked.

"Professor?" Harry asked blearily. His return to consciousness was not an easy one. Everything still seemed out of focus and he was having trouble remembering what was going on.

"I'd like you to accompany me to the Hospital Wing, and then you can tell me what is happening here."

Harry merely nodded, and after Dumbledore led him to a bed and had Harry situated, he informed the nurse. Harry had a broken ankle and needed to regrow the bones in his right hand. Dumbledore also discovered the status of the two patients he had placed under Poppy's care.

Gilderoy Lockhart had died from severe head trauma and loss of blood. Percy Weasley seemed to be suffering the effects of a Dementor's kiss. In the back of his mind, Dumbledore realized he would need to find a new Head Boy for next fall. The main question was though, were the two attacks related? Percy had obviously been abducted by the Heir of Slytherin. But how had Tom Riddle done it? Hopefully Harry had some light to shed on what was occurring.

"Do you know anything about what has happened, Harry?" Dumbledore asked, a touch of urgency affecting his tone of voice.

"About the Chamber?" Harry asked. Dumbledore nodded, prompting Harry to continue.

"I know that Tom Riddle was possessing people, using them to open the Chamber, by means of a diary. I don't know or remember where it is," Harry said, thinking hard but drawing a blank.

A lot of pieces clicked together. Had Gilderoy possibly been the latest victim? Riddle must have taken Percy Weasley's soul, and killed Lockhart, before leaving. That was very disturbing news indeed: it meant that Riddle had his own body, deduced the headmaster. Dumbledore felt relatively confident in his assessment, but something was still nagging the back of his head: why not use the killing curse? At sixteen, Tom Riddle had proved himself more than capable. Unless he was wandless...

"Professor?" Harry asked.

"Yes, Harry?"

"What happened to Astoria?" Dumbledore frowned.

"I will let you know as soon as I find out, Harry."

"HARRY!" Harry and Dumbledore turned, facing Daphne, Astoria, and Blaise.

"I believe we have discovered what happened to the younger Miss Greengrass," Dumbledore said with a smile. At least something good had occurred.

"It seems like the three of you have quite the tale to tell me," Dumbledore said. They nodded grimly and took a seat around Harry.

Astoria went first, telling how Percy had imperioused her and led her down into the Chamber before she was stunned. Dumbledore nodded; he had surmised as much and this proved that Percy was the one with the diary. Daphne confirmed the diary's existence when she explained how she had taken the memory from Hermione, only she subtly changed her story, saying Hermione had used the

bracelet Harry had given her to pull out the memory. She elaborated that Hermione had seemed to break down a wall in her mind when she released the memory Daphne needed. Blaise chipped in with what they discovered in the Chamber, and explained the presence of a basilisk. Harry glanced at Blaise quickly, but his best friend had a story ready.

"We conjured a mirror and the basilisk looked at itself and died instantly. It disappeared though. It sunk back to wherever it came from. We weren't anxious to go after it," Blaise finished. Harry realized they had left him an opening to get his ally– or else the basilisk was really dead. Harry would have to find out.

"You have given me much to think about," Dumbledore said finally. With a heavy heart, he bid them farewell, informing them of his duty to relay Percy's predicament to his parents. They all nodded solemnly and watched as the esteemed headmaster left to inform two parents of their child's untimely demise.

"So did you really kill the basilisk?" Harry asked once the Hospital Wing was empty.

Blaise shook his head. Harry smiled.

"What happened to Lockhart?" Astoria asked curiously. Daphne and Blaise developed guilty looks on their faces.

"I heard Pomfrey telling Dumbledore he died of severe head trauma and blood loss."

Blaise and Daphne looked slightly pale.

"You two wouldn't know anything about that would you?" Harry asked.

"He tried to Memory Charm us," defended Blaise hotly. Harry held his hands up.

"So you killed him?" Harry asked. Somewhere in the back of his mind, Harry felt a perverse sense of pleasure in Lockhart getting what he had coming to him, although it was a bit harsh..

"Not intentionally," Daphne said. "We both hit him with a stunner when he pulled his wand on us. He hit the wall with a pretty bad crack. We neglected to bring him to the Hospital Wing."

"In our defense, we didn't know he was bleeding," Blaise said.

"Your secret's safe with us, right, Astoria?"

"Of course," she said, although she was regarding her sister in a different light.

"Let's get out of here," Harry whispered. "I'll come back later, I need to get treated obviously, but I don't want to be locked up here just yet."

The four of them truly smiled for the first time in a long time, and left to return to their dorms. Harry hoped they wouldn't get busted for aiding and abetting a fugitive from the Hospital Wing. They ran across an unlikely person to be at Hogwarts, Lucius Malfoy. His house elf, Dobby, was trailing behind him.

"Mr. Potter," Malfoy Sr. regarded coolly.

"Lord Malfoy," returned Harry. Malfoy raised an eyebrow. "Have you considered my request to purchase your house elf?" Malfoy's posture changed instantly. His business like appearance formed quickly.

"I have, and am pleased to say I will accept for the price of seven hundred galleons."

"Seven hundred galleons?" Harry said in surprise. "I'll give you four hundred," Harry countered.

"Please don't waste my time, Mr. Potter. He's easily worth six hundred. I'll go no lower than that."

"Have you found a suitable replacement?" Harry asked.

"Yes, I have, and will purchase the replacement after this transaction is completed."

"I'll give you five hundred galleons and give your son back the Seeker position for the first game of next season. If he keeps it is up to him, but I will let him have the first match, no questions asked."

Lucius Malfoy seemed to have developed a bitter taste in his mouth. He had heard of his son's failure as a Seeker. The offer was too good to pass up. Of course, he didn't know that Harry had already lost the position but hey, that was his loss.

"We have a deal, Mr. Potter."

"I will have the galleons transferred to your account immediately."

Malfoy quickly drew up a parchment to document the sale and make it binding. Harry looked it over and made Malfoy change a couple things in small print the aristocrat had added. Malfoy seemed impressed Harry had spotted them and merely took them off, not abashed in the slightest. Once the contract was written to Harry's approval, he signed it, as did Malfoy, though slightly bitter he hadn't snuck in the provision of Dobby still obeying him in the future.

A quick ritual to transfer ownership over to Harry of the house elf sealed the deal, and Harry handed Malfoy a parchment signed to give him five hundred galleons from Harry's account. Dobby seemed ecstatic to have been freed and to serve the "great Harry Potter." Malfoy nodded politely and left the castle, leaving Harry with a fanatically loyal house elf.

"Dobby, just go work in the kitchens until term is over. I'll deal with everything about how you will work for me when the summer begins. I'll call you if you're needed."

"Thank you, Harry Potter, sir, you are kinder than Dobby could ever imagine, and you kept your word to Dobby that you would free him, Harry Potter, sir, never breaks a promise." Harry sighed.

"Go work, Dobby."

The Weasleys sent Percy to the long-term St. Mungo's ward at Dumbledore's prompting— he seemed to believe if Riddle was located, Percy's soul could still be saved. The mandrake potion was completed and everyone who had been petrified was brought back to the land of the living. Fred didn't take the news of Percy's

condition well at all and the rest of the Weasley helped him get through it. Harry personally felt bad about the situation and resolved to do something for the twins at some point in the future.

As for Tracey and Lily, it was great to have them back. He and Blaise gave them their Christmas presents, which they both loved, and they caught them up on everything that had happened. Tracey gave Harry a big hug and began to talk excitedly about trying out for chaser next year with the new gloves, while Lily put on the earrings and actually giggled every time the dragon's snorted fire.

The rest of term went by quickly and final exams were cancelled to everyone's surprise. It elicited a roaring party in the common room. Everyone paid their respects to Lockhart— most of the girls were distraught, including a certain bushy-haired witch, which annoyed Blaise more than he would admit to anyone. He and Daphne were still struggling over their feelings towards accidentally killing Lockhart. No one had said anything, but they had chalked it up to self-defense and seemed to be doing their best to not let it affect any of them. Harry had mentioned how he had indirectly killed Quirrell as well and the three of them seemed to have bonded slightly from the shared events.

As for Tracey and Lily, they were quickly getting back into the swing of things, and Lily's twin brothers, Castor and Pollux, stopped by to visit their younger sister. They had begun working at an upper scale magical artifact shop in Knockturn Alley. Harry vowed to stop by at some point after hearing that their inventory was quite expansive. When he mentioned a pair of vanishing cabinets, Pollux's blue eyes lit up like fireworks.

"Vanishing cabinets?" Pollux asked quickly. "Really?" At Harry's nod, Pollux nudged his brother Castor and whispered with him fiercely.

"We'll be in touch, Harry Potter."

"Just Harry, if you don't mind."

The brothers grinned. "Just Harry it is then." They ruffled Lily's hair again and promised to pick her up at the platform.

Eventually, the year drew to a close and the train pulled into the station. Harry was sent back with his relatives once more for another

dreadful summer. He wished everyone goodbye and promised to write and receive letters this time. Also, Dobby had given him all of the letters they had previously written, looking sheepish about it, and Harry knew that this summer he would actually stay in contact with his friends. Astoria gave him a big hug, even though he hadn't managed to rescue her. She chided him gently for it and Harry grinned. He waved at his friends as he passed through the barrier and headed towards his grumpy looking Uncle.

As he walked back into the Muggle world, Harry couldn't help but feel like he was missing something...

Book Three: Harry Potter and the Mental Magics

Chapter 17: Escaping Hell

Abandon all hope, ye who enter here, is adorned on the entrance leading to Dante's Hell. Hell goes by another name in the Wizarding World: Azkaban.

It's been said that Azkaban prison is a dark and desolate place. That the warmth fears it and stays away, leaving only its absence there.

The ninth circle of Hell is reserved for traitors. Frozen in ice, disfigured beyond all possible imagination, is the fate for those who have betrayed their kind. In Azkaban, Dementors, the soul-sucking fiends that have the power to make you relive your worst possible memories, haunt the place. They take a perverse sense of pleasure taking away anything that provides warmth or inspires happiness. You are frozen in your own bad memories and the temperature in the room has dipped below the scale. Fire cannot exist here, leaving those prisoners to their fate.

In the lowest level of Azkaban lie the most dangerous criminals in the Wizarding World. Among them were Bellatrix Lestrange, an insane killer who enjoyed torturing her victims into insanity, Augustus Rookwood, a traitor among the Unspeakables, who was sentenced to the bottomless pits of Azkaban because the Ministry did not treat traitors lightly, Antonin Dolohov, an expert in various methods of torture to extract information from his captives before brutally murdering them and leaving their bodies on display to the Ministry, and Sirius Black, notorious mass murderer who killed thirteen Muggles and a wizard with a single curse, and most importantly betrayed the Potter family to Lord Voldemort. He was known to be Lord Voldemort's most powerful and loyal supporter. This was what everyone had been led to believe.

The mind of sixteen year old Tom Riddle was no exception.

Riddle had been hailed as one of the most intelligent students Hogwarts had ever held. Riddle knew above all else, he currently needed followers. In the body he was in, he entered Azkaban with his head held high, a haughty sneer forming on his lips, his robes billowing out behind him with a natural elegance that most can only dream of obtaining.

The Killing Curse easily disposed of the lone security guard and Riddle strode in confidently. The dementors flocked to him, drawn by his power and the darkness that surrounded him. They were his natural allies, and Riddle knew this. They escorted him to the lower depths of Azkaban, intent on helping him retrieve his followers.

Dolohov and Rookwood were both easy to convince. The fact that he was releasing them from their confinement possibly had something to do with it. Wizards were so easy to manipulate, Riddle thought with a smirk. Everyone has their price. Lestrange was the next cell he entered, and after a short introduction and explanation, she would follow him wherever he chose to lead her. Her insanity was slightly amusing, but the sadistic streak she had would surely keep his other followers in line.

The last cell he reached, belonging to his most faithful follower, Sirius Black, was guarded by a trio of dementors. They were reluctant to let him go. He seemed to have a positive memory that they were incapable of taking away. Tom Riddle entered the cell and stared at the man in front of him.

"Sirius Black," he said by way of greeting. Black looked up at him with gray eyes staring out from dark and sunken sockets. A mess of filthy, matted hair hung down to his elbows. He looked the worst of the group Riddle was freeing.

"My most loyal Death Eater."

Bellatrix made a noise of protest but Riddle waved it off.

"He gave me the location of the Potters. Harry Potter will be killed, and Sirius Black will help me do it. He will help me finish what we started those twelve years ago."

"Lord Voldemort?" Sirius croaked in shock.

"Though I am not in my normal body, that is correct. I am here to release you, so you can reenter my service."

"My Lord!" cried Bellatrix. "He doesn't bear our Mark."

"It would have aroused suspicion among my friends," Sirius choked out.

"Of course," Riddle said smoothly. "Naturally I would have foreseen that. Will you rejoin your Lord, Sirius Black?"

"You're getting me out of here?" Sirius asked in confirmation. Riddle nodded.

"I would like your aid to crush the hope of these fools. They believe in failure, and refuse to listen to reason. A revolution is needed to cleanse the populace and save our way of life. That may sound evil, but nothing is automatically good or evil; good and evil is merely a preconceived notion of society's view of what is right and what is wrong. Who are they to decide? Who is to say that the opposite doesn't hold true? That right is really wrong and wrong is actually right."

Riddle's philosophy was if you can't convince them with brilliance, confuse them with bullshit. However, his most loyal follower would need no convincing. This was merely a reminder, as it had been twelve long years since he had been in this place.

"That makes sense." Sirius said, strength seeping into his voice. In his mind, the ends would eventually justify the means. He pulled himself up off the floor and Riddle led the way out. Hours later, the Ministry would realize they lost four high-security prisoners. Seconds later, Harry Potter woke up screaming.

"Boy!" Vernon Dursley slammed on the door that would reveal Harry's room, the smallest bedroom of Number Four, Privet Drive.

The door gave way under Vernon's onslaught and revealed a teenager shaking uncontrollably in his bed, eyes wide, staring fearfully at the man with the rapidly purpling face. On closer inspection, it seemed that Harry was actually staring through him. Vernon shivered under the intense stare, and decided the "old one, two" would fix this problem. He approached the now eerily silent teenager and drew his fist back, before throwing it full force at Harry's jaw—

Only to have it pass right through. It didn't even seem as if the boy had moved, but Vernon's punch had missed, throwing him off

balance and forcing him to crash to the floor. He blamed it on lack of sleep because of the troublesome brat, and after a frosty glare, left the room promising vengeance in the morning.

Harry, on the other hand, was still staring out the door, and having things flash through his mind that were not at all comforting. He saw through Riddle's eyes— how?— he had no idea, but he knew that four of the most dangerous Death Eaters in existence had just joined the ranks of his mortal enemy. The only question was why? Lord Voldemort, according to Future-Harry, had no body. Harry knew Riddle and Voldemort were one and the same, but there seemed to be a gap in his memory, triggered by what he had witnessed. He realized he would need to talk to someone.

Finally tearing his gaze away from the door, Harry fell back into his bed and began to journey into the mess that was his mind. He and Future-Harry needed to talk.

When he eventually reached the representation of Hogwarts in his mind, Future-Harry appeared and the two began walking near the lake, avoiding the Forest where Voldemort was currently residing.

Various memories walked by him, although now they weren't all Harrys but were in fact different people. He had sorted through his memories and classified individuals in their own category, so now he could walk up to his representation of Blaise Zabini and find out what he knew about him and see memories involving him. The same held true for other people. There were still Harrys walking around though, which were memories he had yet to classify and sort, mostly involving memories outside of classes, such as the attack on the troll, for example.

Future-Harry represented a whole different type of memories. Everything he knew about the future had been set aside into his representation of the Room of Requirement, which he had conveniently discovered in a preserved memory. Most of the memories from the future were still being held by Voldemort in the dome in the forest. Voldemort's memories were also all consolidated into a single entity which made for a powerful form inside Harry's mind. He had been strengthened by the possession of Tom Riddle, which made him all the more dangerous. Harry still wasn't strong enough mentally to take him on. He would need to finish the protections that would go in place in his mind before he would be

ready, because failure would mean the death of Harry, and his body would become Lord Voldemort's.

"We need to talk," Harry said briskly, looking at his future counterpart.

"Obviously," Future-Harry retorted.

"What do we know about Sirius Black?" Harry asked with a sense of urgency.

"Well, he's a grim animagus, he was wrongly imprisoned in Azkaban—"

"Wrongly imprisoned?" Harry cut in.

"Yeah, he wasn't the one working with Voldemort, Pettigrew was."

"Well, it looks like he's working with Voldemort now. Azkaban must have driven him insane." Harry relayed the dream he had. Future-Harry's expression darkened considerably.

"That changes a lot. He escaped on his own last time, but if Voldemort broke him out and has gained his loyalty, that's not a good thing."

"I thought you said Voldemort didn't have a body."

"He doesn't, but the diary is still in one piece isn't it?" Harry nodded wearily.

"And Percy is soulless right?" Another grim nod from Harry.

"Then it sounds like Tom Riddle was resurrected from the diary. Did you encounter him at all? Did you enter the Chamber?"

"I— I don't know. I suppose we could ask Moaning Myrtle. I can't seem to remember. All I know is that Professor Dumbledore found me stunned."

"Well, before we go into that, there's a wall that appeared around a memory over here. I wanted to clear it with you so we could see what it is," Future-Harry said. The two of them approached

cautiously and Harry tentatively cast a low-powered vanishing spell. The wall disappeared, leaving Harry one memory to look at.

"Shall we?"

The two delved into the memory and watched as Harry had been controlled by the diary. Harry watched as he walked right into Percy Weasley.

"Potter," Weasley said, staring at him. Harry, still possessed, seemed to ignore him.

"What are you doing out here? And what are you doing with that diary? I seem to remember that belonged to someone in Gryffindor. I'll have you for stealing that. That will be five points from Slytherin," the boy said tersely. "And I'll be taking this." The diary was confiscated and Percy left abruptly. Harry watched as Riddle's control broke from Harry's body, but not before a compulsion charm was cast at Percy's retreating back, getting him to write in the diary.

"So that's how Percy got the diary..." Harry said softly.

"Didn't see that one coming," Future-Harry said.

"Now, we have something else to talk about."

"Sirius Black."

"Right. He betrayed my parents."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that," Future-Harry said.

"What do you know that I don't?" Harry asked.

"A lot of things," Future-Harry said cheekily.

"I'm the Slytherin here, leave the sarcasm to me."

"Gryffindors can't be sarcastic?" Future-Harry countered.

Harry just gave him a disgruntled glare.

"Ok, so why didn't he betray my parents?"

"Well, if I remember right—"

"Well you do have issues about memory loss—"

"I think Pettigrew was the Secret Keeper and gave Voldemort the location of where you were hiding."

"That bastard," Harry growled. "So are you saying Black was just playing Voldemort to get sprung from prison?"

"It's possible," Future-Harry said.

"How Slytherin of him. Didn't know he had it in him," Harry said with a smirk.

"Don't let him hear you say that," cautioned Future-Harry.

"Ok, so Black isn't a threat then."

"No, we need to focus on Riddle. The one that possessed you and managed to escape since you didn't destroy the diary. If you had done it my way, things would have been so much simpler—"

"Don't even go there," Harry snapped. "Had I done it your way, a valuable ally would have been killed."

"Percy would still have been alive though," Future-Harry shot back.

"As if Percy was a great loss," Harry said.

"Don't talk about people you don't know!" Future-Harry yelled.

"Why do you think the Weasleys were all that great anyway?" Harry asked curiously.

"They let me in as a part of their family."

"You're weak," Harry said. "I'm glad Voldemort prevented the full merging of our souls at the beginning. I wouldn't have been able to stand it. The Weasleys are too narrow-minded. They want everything to be black and white, right and wrong. Even the twins, to some extent, see things that way. Percy was the worst of the lot. He

saw things as by the book, or breaking the rules. Didn't think for himself. One of the things that got him killed, I'd wager."

Future-Harry grew red in anger. But Harry wasn't finished.

"As much as you probably wish it could have happened, it didn't. I'm not in Gryffindor, and I'm not an extended family member of the Weasleys. I'm a Slytherin, and if we're going to work together you're going to have to accept that."

Future-Harry rubbed his forehead. "You're right," he admitted finally.

"Of course I am. The sooner you get used to that, the easier this is going to be. This isn't your world anymore. This isn't your future. It's mine. Now you're going to stop influencing my actions. I'll come here when I need help analyzing something, or I need an outside viewpoint, or we've decided to take back the section of my mind Voldemort owns. Otherwise, I'd prefer if you didn't try and make me act more like a Gryffindor. Blaise has been shooting me odd looks from time to time because I'll do something not befitting a Slytherin. While it could be blamed on my Muggle heritage, I have a feeling it's you."

"You can't just turn evil, Harry. You need the light side to support you."

"Evil?" Harry asked incredulously. "So you're saying because I'm a Slytherin I'm evil? It's no wonder Voldemort killed your ass the first time around. You're just as bad as the rest of them."

"That's not what I meant."

"Oh?" sneered Harry. "Enlighten me then. What, pray tell, did you mean?"

"I meant that if you turn against the people on the light side, they won't be willing to help you defeat Voldemort."

"Why are you so sure about that? They believe they have to fight evil, and Voldemort, as you so eloquently would put it, is evil, no?"

Future-Harry glared. Harry laughed.

"Well, would you say my logic is flawed?"

The glare intensified. "Harry, Harry, Harry," Harry said, in a fantastic impersonation of Lockhart. Future-Harry cringed at the tone. Harry fought back the desire to snort and instead put his arm around his future counterpart.

"When I need to rush into danger, you'll be the one I turn to, of that you can be certain. But for now, why don't you start sorting your own memories that you have access to? They're all in the Room of Requirement." Harry couldn't resist the urge to make a shooing motion with his hands before returning back to consciousness.

With a groan, Harry dragged himself out of bed. He'd already been back at Number Four for almost a month, and it had been a very long month. Fortunately, he had been working on carving a guitar out of the wood the Greengrass sisters had sent him for Christmas. He hadn't made a lot of headway, but he had started to carve out what would become the neck of the guitar. He had found a book on guitars in the attic and had decided that was the instrument he would make.

The instrument wasn't the only thing he was working on though. This summer, he was receiving owl post from his friends now so he was still sane, but the Dursleys were getting on his nerves. A small bright side was that he would be leaving to Blaise's house in a week.

He glanced over at the calendar and realized with a start it was his birthday. How had he missed that? The now thirteen year old Harry Potter glanced around his room before noticing some new mail. Hedwig must have dropped it off during the night, and her proud stare seemed to confirm that fact. Harry glanced at his post and recognized the handwriting of his friends.

Harry,

How's it going mate? Hope you're having a decent birthday. Just think, four years from now you can legally cast magic and torture the Muggle relatives of yours. Harry could hear Blaise's sarcastic snort in his mind. Got you a present. And we'll portkey over to get you next week. See you then!

-Blaise

Blaise wasn't one to write long and detailed letters so Harry just looked for the present that came with it. surprisingly, it was missing. He shrugged. He looked at Daphne's letter next. It was from Astoria as well.

Harry,

I hope this letter finds you in good health. How formal, Harry thought. Happy Birthday Harry! Thanks for not rescuing me, prat! There was Astoria's bold handwriting. We still need to have a long discussion about what happened in the Chamber, Harry. I can understand that you didn't want to talk about it then, but the next time I see you, we have a lot of things to talk about. You should come visit over the hols. We can make you look like a Gryffindor on a broom if we play Quidditch. Forgive Astoria, she has been grounded lately and has nothing to do. Happy Birthday, Harry.

-Daphne and Astoria

Harry opened the present that the Greengrass sisters had given him and stared at it. It was something that could only be a glove, but it was the strangest glove he had ever seen. Harry tried it on, wondering if he was supposed to wear it. He looked at the note with it, hoping to learn more about his present.

This is a Spell Catcher. You can use it to catch a spell thrown at you and then throw it back at an opponent. It can be worn as a glove, or it can merge onto your wand and you won't even have to cast a shield to stop the spell. If it's merged on the wand though, you can't throw the curse back. The only catch is that not all spells can be caught by it. It doesn't work with unforgivables and other forms of magic specific to each Spell Catcher, so you'll have to test the limits yourself.

"That is bloody awesome," Harry said to himself. He opened Lily's next.

Harry,

Thanks for the earrings! They are gorgeous. I found a way to make the dragon's breath become cooling charms too! It's too bad we didn't get to spend as much time together since I was petrified and

all... Anyway, Happy Birthday! I thought you'd like this, so, here it is.
See you September 1st!

-Lily

p.s. My brothers want to know if you're interested in selling those vanishing cabinets and they want to talk to you when you get to Blaise's..

Harry opened the present and laughed. She had given him a pair of two-way mirrors, similar to the ones she and Tracey had when they were petrified.

Now, I know two-way mirrors and I don't have a very great relationship, considering that's how I was petrified, but I thought you and Blaise, or you and whoever really, would be able to use these.

Harry set it aside and opened Tracey's letter next.

Harry!

Happy Birthday! I hope you're enjoying your summer. You better be practicing to play Chaser with me, because if you're not Seeker we're going to be Chasing together. So get that in your head, Mr. Potter! Harry was surprised by Tracey's tone. But then, being petrified for a few months could change your personality a bit. So since I still owe you a Christmas present too, I just got a good birthday present. I hope you like it!

-Tracey

Harry opened the present from Tracey and was in shock. He dropped it as if his hands had been burned.

"Is she bloody serious?" Harry stared at the book in shock. Twelve Fail-Safe Ways to Charm Witches stared back at him. He flipped through it, shaking his head as he did so. Chapter one, he noted, was on compliments. Harry put the book to the side and opened a letter from Hermione.

Harry,

Happy Birthday! I'm leaving Spain shortly, so I don't know if this letter arrived on time. They assured me it would but I'm used to being assured of deliveries and have them run late so I don't know if this got here on time. Anyway, Madrid is beautiful. The history of the Spanish wizards is just unbelievable. Did you know that Queen Isabella was a witch? That was how Spain won some of their greatest victories on the battlefield. Her spellcasting was confused for prayer. Anyway, I hope you're enjoying your summer! I found something in the Spanish Diagon Alley that I thought you might like,

-Hermione

Harry opened the present and revealed a compass, capable of attaching to his broomstick.

You can set it to point North, or you can set it to point towards a specific location.

"That could come in handy," Harry muttered.

The Augurey that Harry had given to Hagrid for Christmas flew through the window. It deposited a package and took off, as silently as it had arrived.

Harry,

Hope yer having a Happy Birthday. Thanks fer Reaper, he's amazing. Always seems ter cry when it's going ter rain too. Bloody brilliant, that bird is. I never got ter properly thank yeh. Anyway, we'll see yeh when term stars again. And Happy Birthday!

-yer friend, Hagrid

Hagrid seemed to return Harry's present in kind, giving him an animal of his own. Although it was actually a book, the Monster Book of Monsters was really anything but. It attacked Harry with a vengeance, and it took a burst of inspiration for Harry to divebomb it. After suffering multiple bites to the arms, and one severe bite on the face, he managed to pin it underneath him. He accidentally brushed the back of the book and it froze, and then quivered underneath him, falling open eagerly.

A sigh escaped Harry's lips. Only Hagrid.

The last remaining letter was from Hogwarts. It seemed thicker than normal, and Harry soon discovered why.

Mr. Potter,

Please be aware that the Hogwarts Express will be departing from King's Cross on September 1st from Platform nine and three quarters at precisely Eleven o'clock. Also, third years and above are granted permission to visit the village of Hogsmeade. Enclosed is a permission slip to be signed by your parents or guardians.

A list of books for the upcoming school year is enclosed.

Yours Sincerely,

Minerva McGonagall

Deputy Headmistress

The permission slip was enclosed, along with a list of books. Another note fell out as well.

Mr. Potter,

We did not receive your choice of electives for the upcoming school year. Please send an owl with the list of classes you will be taking. Your choices are:

Divination

Care of Magical Creatures

Arithmancy

Ancient Runes

Muggle Studies

-Professor McGonagall.

Harry cursed mildly— with all the excitement he had forgotten all about electives. He decided to go with Care of Magical Creatures,

and after a lot of thought, Ancient Runes. It sounded like a class with the potential for interesting magic to learn. He considered Arithmancy, but wasn't sure if his maths were good enough to take the class.

A banging on his door reminded him that breakfast was happening, and if he wanted to eat anything he would have to go down there. They had decided not to make him do very many chores, since he had threatened to curse them, but he still had to be at the table for food if he wanted any, although generally he made his own meals since they never went out of the way for him. Today was no different, as he had to make his own bacon and eggs to eat.

The Dursleys were watching the news on a new television, a welcome back present to Dudley, who had been complaining about having to walk from the kitchen to the living room. He was the epitome of laziness, and Harry was disgusted. Dudley had put on more weight, and didn't seem to show signs of stopping. Soon, they would need help just moving him from place to place. Harry was surprised the stairs could support his weight, although deep down he knew he was exaggerating.

Harry wondered if the escape of the four high security prisoners from Azkaban would warrant making the Muggle news. It seemed as though the Ministry was intent on hushing up the break out though, as nothing was on the telly.

"I've got to go get Marge in a minute, Petunia. Her train should be arriving soon."

"Marge?" Harry asked in disgust.

"Aunt Marge to you, freak. You will treat her with respect, better than you treat us. And I don't want a word uttered about your— your unnaturalness. We've told her you attend St. Brutus's School for Incurably Criminal Boys, and you're to stick to that story, boy!"

Vernon finished his speech in a no nonsense tone, and it made Harry wonder if he had forgotten the threats he had given them when he returned from his first year at Hogwarts.

"You ask for a lot, Vernon," replied Harry coolly. He began turning slightly purple. Harry resisted the urge to cast the silencing spell. "Now, I'm willing to do as you ask— if you do something for me."

Vernon seemed to have some internal argument. Give in to Harry's demand, but have him be civil to Marge. Harry saw when he made the decision.

"Good." Harry was about to ask for him to sign the permission form, but realized it would be more intelligent to ask Petunia. After all, she was less violent. Harry debated the merits of asking either one of them. He could blackmail Vernon into signing it now. Or he could convince Petunia to do it. After a moment's thought, he went with his gut, which was to ask Vernon.

"I have a permission form I need signed for my school."

"If you do as I say, I'll sign the form for you," Vernon said.

"No," Harry said shortly. "You'll sign it first. I don't trust you to follow your end of the bargain."

"If I sign it, then I won't have anything to keep you in line," Vernon said, showing previously unheard of intelligence. Harry scowled.

"We'll be taking my word here, as I'm the one who has proven himself most trustworthy. Sign the form, and I will give you my wand until Marge leaves. You're not to do anything to my wand other than hold on to it. "

Vernon's eyes lit up. Harry went upstairs to grab the permission slip and grabbed a piece of the tree branch near his window. He carved it into the rough shape of a wand as quickly as he could and walked sedately downstairs. Vernon already had his pen in hand, a maniacal gleam in his eye. He held his hand out expectantly and Harry handed him the permission slip, before setting the makeshift wand on the table, his hand hovering over it. Vernon grimaced, wanting the wand first. Harry waited until he signed the permission form before moving his hand from the stick and taking the form back. Vernon grabbed the stick and looked at it. He glanced back at Harry, before a calculating look entered his eye.

"You can't do magic without this?" he asked.

"I can't do magic without a wand," Harry clarified. Vernon grinned. Harry knew what was going to happen before it did.

SNAP

"You won't be doing magic anymore then!" he said with a laugh. "There's nothing you can do to us anymore!" He raised his beefy fist to strike Harry in the head. Harry decided now would be a good time to make a point, so he drew his wand and pointed it at Vernon's neck, digging it for emphasis.

"Do you really think I would have been stupid enough to give you my real wand?" Harry asked.

"You tricked me," wheezed Vernon.

"Yes, yes I did, Vernon. I wouldn't recommend you trying to do that to me in the future. I may have to kill you." Vernon turned white, which was the new purple, and his eyes bugged out of their sockets at the threat.

"You wouldn't," he whispered.

"Don't be so confident about that," Harry whispered right back. "Freaks, like me, don't care too much about what happens to stupid Muggles, like yourself. Actually, many would applaud me for killing you. Don't overestimate your importance to me. I'd kill you for a Klondike bar," Harry finished with a grin, remembering a commercial he had seen on the telly.

"Now, I'll agree to be civil to Marge, because I don't go back on my word, unlike some people," Harry said, tilting his head towards his Uncle. He finally withdrew the wand and a large purple bruise had appeared on Vernon's neck where the wand had been moments earlier.

"And if you don't try and kill me or damage my property I won't use any—" Harry paused to bring more attention to his next word, "magic," he finished with a smirk. It had the desired effect. The purple bruise disappeared, camouflaged by the rest of Vernon's skin, which had taken on a purple tinge. Properly cowed, Vernon left to

get his sister, leaving Harry to head up to his room. He sent Hedwig off with a letter, asking if Blaise could pick him up any sooner.

Harry cleaned up his room with nothing better to do while he waited for a reply. Aunt Petunia's shrill voice calling him down to greet their guest came before Hedwig did, so Harry trooped downstairs wondering just how he would treat Marge. (She really wasn't his Aunt, and Harry decided he wouldn't treat her as such.)

Harry stood off to the side and was handed Marge's bags as if he were a house-elf. He waited until she left the room and with a burst of inspiration called Dobby.

The house-elf appeared with a crack.

"How can Dobby be helping Master Harry Potter, sir?" he asked hurriedly.

"Well, I need you to take these bags to Marge's room but don't use magic. I don't want the Ministry sending me another letter."

"Dobby's magic isn't detected by the Ministry. House-elf magic is being different from wizard's magic. But house-elves can use wizard's magic if we is wanting to." Dobby said excitedly.

"Oh, well in that case go ahead and do what you need to do," Harry said, smiling slightly. Dobby nodded vigorously and the luggage disappeared. Harry sighed contentedly. Living under the same roof with Marge wouldn't be so bad, especially if Blaise came through and he could leave early. Harry headed into the kitchen, returning Marge's bulldog Ripper's growl with interest. Marge turned to Harry, her attention riveted on him.

As luck would have it, Hedwig seemed to harbor a desire to torment Marge as much as Harry did. He could scarcely contain his laughter when Hedwig flew into the house, cuffing Marge on the side of the head before she could start on her rant about Harry. Hedwig deposited a letter on Harry's lap and fled the room. Harry caught her amused gaze as she flew away.

"Owls! In my house!" Vernon shouted menacingly. He glared at Harry, as if to say it was his fault, which it technically was, but that

was beside the point. "I'll kill the ruddy bird next time it flies in here..." he growled.

Harry shot Vernon a glare a basilisk would have been afraid to look at. He quailed under Harry's gaze. But Marge was oblivious to it all.

"So you're still here, you ungrateful little orphan?" she spat. Harry merely nodded. This was going to be fun.

"He attends St. Brutus's School for Incurably Criminal Boys. It's for hopeless cases," Vernon said, his fleeting courage making a comeback in the face of magic. After all, he had just threatened Harry's property, and that would not go unpunished.

"Excellent," she replied. "Do they use the cane there, boy?"

Harry regarded her coolly for a moment. She seemed slightly flustered he wasn't giving in to her every whim and desire, the spoiled bitch.

"Yes," Harry said finally, and Vernon let out a heavy breath.

"That's good news. You can't back down from punishing these troublesome little pricks. Have you been beaten?"

"Of course I have," Harry said. He just managed to hold back, look who I live with, but only just. Besides, Marge would be pleased more than anything. And Harry was determined to win this war. He would not lose to some filthy relative of his Uncle's, especially when said relative was crazy.

"Inform the school he should be beaten more often, Petunia. For wayward cases like his, I'm sure it couldn't hurt." Harry nodded curtly, and left the room.

"Boy! I'm not done talking to you!"

Harry turned and sent her an icy glare. "I'm done talking to you though, Marge. Good day."

Harry turned around and began to head up to his room to read Blaise's response.

"You will treat your Aunt Marge with respect!

"I said good day, Marge," Harry replied shortly, and ignored the gasp that emitted from the kitchen.

He headed upstairs and was saddened to see that the earliest he could get there would be a week. Blaise and his family were currently visiting relatives in Italy and wouldn't be back before then. Harry sighed and petted Hedwig, while glancing outside. He caught a glimpse of a familiar looking dog lurking around, but before he could be sure of what he saw, it had vanished.

It took three days for Marge to get over Harry's attitude towards her and be willing to confront him again, so Harry had begun playing various pranks on her. They were really quite childish, like using Dudley's old whoopee cushions on her chair, although chasing Ripper up the tree left Harry feeling vindicated. The dog was still up there, scared shitless. It took the combined effort of the four Dursleys to get the dog back down. Marge was furious. They began giving her wine to calm her down. After her fourth drink she confronted Harry.

"Think that's funny, do you? Poor Ripper, you're lucky I don't send him after you. We would be scraping what's left of you off the floor," threatened Marge. Harry couldn't help it; he burst out laughing. The bulldog eyed him warily and when Harry pretended to step forward quickly it yelped and dove in Marge's blouse. Harry had to lean on the wall to keep from falling.

Marge decided her tactics weren't working and chose a different approach. "You mustn't blame yourself for this horrible person that he has become. It's really all about breeding. If the blood is pure and good, then the child will be similar. Bad blood will out. It's the same with dogs. If there's something wrong with the bitch, there's something wrong with the pup. Nothing against your family, Petunia, but your sister was a bad egg. And she went and reproduced, then got herself killed, leaving the worthless spawn standing in front of us. Good riddance, I say."

Harry's laughter died quickly, as did any hope of Marge leaving Number Four relatively unscathed.

"Don't you dare talk about my Mum," Harry whispered dangerously. "You couldn't dream of being half the person she was." Vernon looked extremely worried and began making motions for Harry to leave.

"That's enough, go on and get out of here," Vernon said. Harry wasn't planning on it. Marge had gone too far, and she would reap what she had sewn.

"No, no, let him, Vernon. Let's hear what he has to say about his worthless parents. A couple of drunks who got themselves killed in a car crash. Unfortunate you didn't die with them," Marge said wistfully.

Harry resisted the urge to pull out his wand. This would require subtlety. And cunning. He would have to be very Slytherin in this confrontation if he wanted to come out on top.

"It's really pathetic that you're jealous of a couple of dead people, Marge. I mean really, just because someone loved my Mum enough to marry her, unlike you, who will die alone because no one in this world can find it in them to truly love you, gives you no right to speak ill of my Mum."

Marge paled rapidly, and she squeezed on her wine glass, shattering it and spilling wine all over herself. She paid it no notice.

"You've gone too far, boy. You dare talk back to your Aunt, after all my family has done for you?"

"All your family has done for me? They've done nothing for me. I've earned everything I've gotten. I have been worked like a slave, and in exchange they give me hand-me-down clothes from Dudley that are better suited to a killer whale, a cupboard to sleep in, and occasionally food that I cooked and prepared. Without me here, Dudley would have to do chores, and we both know he's incapable of exerting himself in something that doesn't promise excitement. If anything they should be grateful for what I've done for them. And as for you, you aren't even my Aunt," Harry said with a bitter laugh. "I'm not related by blood to you at all. And you're absolutely right, bad blood will out. That's why no one married you. They saw you were ill suited to be a mother, and didn't want to create a child that would be even remotely similar to you. And that's dismissing the fact that you

aren't exactly the most beautiful person in the world," Harry said scathingly.

Marge was at a loss for words. Her mouth and opened and closed comically, and she seemed to have trouble breathing. Her face became very red, and Harry wondered what was about to happen. She then fell over, clutching her chest.

The official reports stated that Marge Dursley died of a heart attack, brought on from anxiety, her unhealthy diet, and a weak heart. Vernon Dursley thought he knew better.

"You," he growled menacingly. "You killed her," he said after the ambulance had taken her away and they had returned from the hospital.

"It was a heart attack. I had nothing to do with it. Besides, good riddance, I say." Harry said, throwing Marge's words back in Vernon's face. He swore and made to grab Harry by the throat. Harry's wand was in his hand and pointed at Vernon's face before he had crossed half the distance.

"I'm leaving now. Get out of my way." Harry was careful to kick Ripper on the way to his room and threw everything into his trunk before activating the shrinking charm on it and placing it in his pocket. He sent Hedwig on to Blaise's and left Privet Drive. On the way out, he changed into his Slytherin robes, thinking if he could be recognized by a witch or wizard, they could help him out. He would most likely stand out, but it couldn't be helped.

He was still a couple days early, so he decided he could stay at the Leaky Cauldron. He let his thoughts wander to Marge. He didn't know if accidental magic had killed her, or if she had just had the heart attack from Harry's accusations and verbal attacks. He really couldn't care less either way. The world was better off without her.

He looked around for some modes of transportation and in his sweeping gaze his eyes fell on the dog he had seen from his room a few days ago.

Tom Riddle had tasked Sirius with the task of finding Harry Potter. That hadn't been Sirius's initial goal to accomplish, but it was still pretty high on his list. So Sirius had no problem following through

with that request. Riddle had provided him with a wand and he and the other escapees had waited a couple of weeks to regain some form of health. They were useless while they were still weak.

Once Sirius was ready, he transformed into Padfoot, his Grim animagus form, once he had Apparated away to Little Whinging.

He staked out the neighborhood, not remembering exactly where Harry was staying, and had taken to eating leftovers that had been thrown out. Around Harry's birthday, Sirius found the place. He had locked eyes with Harry from the second floor window of Number Four, and quickly vanished. He knew where Harry was now, and could get him when he came outside.

But Harry never came outside. Sirius was stuck waiting for what seemed like ages. A few days later, he finally noticed Harry walking out briskly, then stopping and sweeping his eyes across the road. His eyes locked with Padfoot, and he felt a shiver as they seemed to read him. Harry then casually dismissed him and returned to making a plan of action.

Sirius's attention was called to Harry's robes. The green and silver Slytherin badge shone prominently. Padfoot threw up the leftovers he had eaten a few hours ago. A Potter in Slytherin? He couldn't stand it.

"There's got to be some explanation," Sirius whispered, as he transformed back into himself. "He must be brainwashed. There's no way James and Lily's son could be in Slytherin."

Sirius knew what he must do. He pulled out the wand that had been given to him and pointed it at Harry. He saw Harry had his wand out and had called the Knight Bus, whether he knew it or not, so Sirius had to act fast.

"Imperio," he whispered softly. Harry abruptly walked over to him in the alley and the two of them Disapparated, leaving the Knight Bus to find an empty road where it had been summoned.

Chapter 18: Shades of Grey

Harry felt the Imperius Curse wash over him and was slightly surprised. From the memories he had of Sirius Black, he didn't seem the type of person to cast an unforgivable. It made Harry curious. What changed? So when Black told him to walk towards him, Harry decided, what the hell? He wanted to know what was going on. He could have easily overthrown it; Black's curse wasn't that great. You have to really want to control a person's will completely to make that spell work. Black didn't have it in him; he was still too weak from the imprisonment.

But Harry let it play out. So when Black grabbed him and the two of them Apparated away, Harry waited until they appeared in the room before he made his move.

He broke the Imperius curse immediately but Black was faster. He apparently had some aversion to using an unforgivable longer than necessary and the bastard stunned Harry before he could do anything.

When he came to again he was tied to a chair and petrified, wearing the strongest glare he could muster. Letting Black kidnap him was starting to seem like a bad idea. He consoled himself in the fact that he still had his wand and if he could break the curse he'd be able to regain the upper hand. He looked around at his surroundings and didn't recognize them. The room he was in seemed fairly beat up. All the furniture was mostly ruined and there were a couple broken windows off to his right. The only door leading out of the room was blocked by Black.

"Harry..."

Harry moved his head to stare at Black incredulously. Time to discover what side Black was really on.

"It's Potter. Not Harry. My friends call me Harry, and I won't count a kidnapper among them, especially a kidnapper who escaped from Azkaban and used an unforgivable on me."

Black winced. "It wasn't like that, Harry."

"Really? I was under the impression that the Imperius curse was unforgivable. And when you take someone against their will, it makes you a kidnapper. And you were broken out of Azkaban. That sounds exactly what it was like. Oh and what did I say about calling me Harry?" Point to Harry.

Black winced again. He had really bungled up whatever it was he had planned by all appearances. He tried to speak but Harry cut him off.

"Taking me to Voldemort are you? Finishing the job you started?" If everything was exactly how it had been for Future-Harry, then that would have been a pretty low blow. But Harry was unsure of everything now. So much had changed. He would have to have another conversation with his future counterpart and sort through everything they knew.

"That's what he asked me to do," Black said hoarsely. Harry was surprised. He hadn't expected Black to say he was in league with Voldemort at all.

"Well get on with it," Harry snapped. "I haven't got all day." Inside though, Harry's mind was racing. He didn't know if he was ready to face Riddle. He would have to try something when Black came closer. But Harry was still unable to move anything besides his mouth. If he could only reach his wand...

Black approached Harry cautiously, and gazed at his robes.

"Why are you wearing Slytherin robes?" Black spat out.

"Yeah, not too bright are you? I'm a Slytherin, Black. Slytherins wear Slytherin robes. Funny how that worked out."

Black looked like he was going to vomit. Harry held back a small smile. Potter: two, Black: zero.

Black looked at him sadly. He waved his wand and the robes disappeared and he cancelled the petrification spell. Surprise registered on Harry's face, but only for a moment. Harry pulled his wand all the way out and Black chucked a portkey at him. Harry then did something that in hindsight was very stupid: he tried to overpower the portkey.

He tried to force his magic to do what he wanted and had Privet Drive in mind. His last image of Black was the man looking on with regret? Harry was caught off guard by that expression and the portkey whisked him away. He thought he heard Black whisper something but it was too faint to hear.

Harry's manipulation of the portkey by all appearances worked, because he hit the ground, landing near where he had been abducted originally.

A purple, triple-decker bus was parked waiting for him.

"We were wondering where you got off to," a man said, who had been outside the bus looking around. He coughed abruptly and straightened up.

"Welcome to the Knight Bus, emergency transport for the stranded witch or wizard. My name is Stan Shunpike and I will be your conductor this evening. For eleven sickles, we'll take you wherever you want to go, but for fifteen we'll give you 'ot chocolate and for fifteen you get an 'ot water bottle an' a toofbrush in the color of your choice."

Harry nodded and handed over eleven sickles. "The Leaky Cauldron, Stan," Harry said as he pushed past the pimply faced conductor.

"Oi, Ern! The Leaky Cauldron!" Stan called. He directed Harry to a seat behind the driver and with a bang they were off.

Harry looked around and noticed he was the only person on the bus. That must have been why they didn't mind waiting for him. Harry watched in surprise as they dodged Muggle vehicles and various lampposts jumped out of their path. It was like Muggles refused to acknowledge magic that was staring them back in the face.

Harry glanced at the newspaper that Stan was holding.

"You mind if I have a look at that," Harry asked quietly. Stan handed the paper to him.

In Light of New Evidence, Fudge Releases Four Prisoners

By: Rita Skeeter

Four high security cells were found empty in a routine check of Azkaban Prison. The reason? New evidence allegedly surfaced casting doubt on their total guilt. Minister Fudge, believing that without concrete evidence that these prisoners were guilty they shouldn't be imprisoned, chose to release them and eliminate the rest of their life long sentences. The prisoners are: Bellatrix Lestrange (For more on Lestrange see page three), Augustus Rookwood (For more on Rookwood, see page four), Antonin Dolohov (For more on Dolohov see page four) and Sirius Black (for more on Black see pages two, six, and seven).

This reporter would like to know just what evidence suddenly appeared in the hands of our Minister, and is wondering if it was suspiciously shaped like a pile of Galleons. Were these prisoners released because of money exchanging hands? Or even more troubling, did they manage the impossible and break out of Azkaban? Is this all just one huge cover up? Until we see proof of such evidence, it would be wise to remain cautious.

Daily Prophet Correspondent:

Rita Skeeter

Harry tried to rationalize why Fudge would be covering up the break out. Rita seemed to have nailed it right on the head. But was she right on all three counts? Had Malfoy paid him off to ensure his silence?

It would take a lot of digging around to discover the truth behind those questions, and Harry wasn't entirely sure he could do it himself.

The bus arrived at the Leaky Cauldron and Harry let himself off. He headed in and rented a room from Tom, the bartender, before heading up and sitting on the bed. He had a couple days left before Blaise was back and he could head over there, so he decided he would get some sleep, buy his school supplies, and then spend time with his friends.

Thankfully, the two days passed without incident. Harry worked on his homework, got his new books, stocked up on Potions ingredients,

and read up on pureblood culture from the book that the Zabinis had given him.

The book, while fairly biased, did offer a glimpse through the eyes of the older families.

He learned about traditional balls, proper attire, how the families used to run the Wizengamot, and other interesting historical facts he would have never known.

A couple days later, before he would fly to Blaise's, he walked by the Quality Quidditch Supplies store and rested his eyes on the most amazing broom in the world: The Firebolt.

Harry felt humbled and unworthy to gaze his eyes upon the magnificent broom. It was perfect in every possible way, and seemed to inspire greatness with its very presence and aura. He had to tear his gaze away when he remembered his perfectly good Nimbus Two Thousand. He felt like he was cheating on his own broomstick the longer he stayed there and he finally left to get his things and leave to Zabini Manor.

Blaise had sent a letter giving him a portkey that would take him there. Harry had been surprised; sending a portkey by owl seemed like something Mr. Zabini would be afraid of doing. But Harry recognized Blaise's handwriting and wasn't too worried when he triggered it.

His calm attitude was not unfounded. He arrived safely at the gates and was greeted by Blaise, who clapped him on the back and led him upstairs to his room.

"Good to see you, Harry."

"The same goes for you, Blaise. How was the vacation?"

"Really boring to be honest. I got in a fight with my Mum; she wanted me to take some extra summer lessons to make me understand the basics of Arithmancy. It took me a month for her to understand I'm not taking that class. I agreed to Runes because I wanted to take that class anyway, so I learned the principles of Ancient Runes."

"Brilliant, you can teach me. I'm taking that class and Magical Creatures."

Blaise laughed. "Well I see we are more alike than I thought. That's my schedule as well."

"We have a lot of mayhem to cause."

"I was thinking, with the Moon twins gone and no one replacing them, we should try and open up a contraband store in Slytherin house. Because last year no one stepped it up."

"That sounds ingenious. How are we supposed to do that?"

"The vanishing cabinets," Blaise said smugly. "We'll keep one with the Moon twins and we hang onto the other, head to their store if we need anything, and we're set." Harry looked at Blaise appraisingly.

"You seem to have thought this through fairly well."

"Of course," Blaise replied. "And I have— other resources which I'm not going to reveal at the moment. If we do this we want to have plausible deniability."

"Agreed. I wonder if that can beat veritaserum..." Harry said, trailing off.

"We should find that out at some point."

"Probably the first time we get caught," Harry said with a grimace.

"Preferably before that," Blaise said.

"Got veritaserum?" Harry asked.

"Yeah, one second," Blaise said. Harry looked at him in surprise. "Let me just pull it out of my pocket where I always keep it." Blaise stared at Harry incredulously, essentially saying: are you kidding?

"Well I thought maybe it was some habit of your father's that he passed on to you or something," Harry said.

Blaise broke into a smirk. "Well he does actually have some on his person at all times. Not sure what good that does for him but there you go. I think he buys it though. My father isn't adept at Potions brewing. My Mum is but she disagrees with his paranoia and would never make it for him. And even if she did he wouldn't trust her to not have sabotaged it."

Harry nodded sagely. "That makes sense."

"Even though my father doesn't," Blaise concluded.

Harry unshrunk his trunk and placed it near the bed, before hopping onto the bed and leaning against the wall, facing Blaise.

"So did you get everything you needed from Diagon?" Harry asked.

"Yeah, I already picked everything up. Tracey and Lily said they'd be arriving tomorrow to spend a few days with us. Daphne and Astoria are just going to meet us at school."

"Any word from Hermione?" Harry asked.

"We don't really talk," Blaise said shortly. Harry could tell it was a sensitive topic and didn't press.

"Well, is there much else to do today? I'm bloody tired."

"It's summer, what do you think?" Blaise asked with a laugh. Harry flopped onto the bed and shut his eyes, waiting for sleep to come to him.

Belatedly, Harry should have realized Future-Harry wanted to talk to him. But Harry's mind was exhausted from the strain of the day so it was a very weary Harry that was confronted by Future-Harry.

"I finished sorting the memories. We have pretty much everything through second year, as well as bits and pieces of Voldemort's memories, and a few memories from beyond second year, but they aren't very distinct. It seems like after you go through the time period, the corresponding memory from my experiences is able to be seen clearly. At least until Voldemort is expelled from here," Future-Harry said.

"Well, that's not too bad then," Harry commented. The anger between the two had vanished; they were once again willing to work together.

"Not at all. We need to deal with Sirius. He seems to have gone... insane."

"Well, Azkaban had to have unbalanced him."

"But he wasn't that badly off for me," Future-Harry countered.

"Something obviously changed. Maybe me being in Slytherin slowly drove him mad," Harry said with a grin. Future-Harry started.

"You might actually be right about that..."

"Don't sound so surprised. I am brilliant. Shhh," Harry finished quickly, putting a finger to his lips to shush Future-Harry.

Future-Harry merely rolled his eyes in annoyance. "It's like you're a thirteen-year-old..."

Harry snorted. "I am. Obviously, you're not the brilliant one."

"Back on topic: Black. What are we going to do?"

"Well... there's really not much we can do. We'll have to wait for a confrontation— on our own terms, hopefully. We need to talk to him, but we need to be in the position of power."

"Well said," commended Future-Harry.

"Do we know what his objectives are?" Harry asked. Future-Harry snapped his fingers.

"Yes! He's looking for Pettigrew... well he was when I was there. Now he really might be after you..."

"Well then we'll have to find Pettigrew first then."

"He's a rat animagus."

"Ok, we'll keep an eye out for rats. That's really all we can do for now. On another note, any ideas for Blaise's contraband stop n' shop?"

"Yeah, actually I do. Don't make it completely illegal items, get Fred and George Weasley in on it, and try and branch out to different houses."

"Cheers, mate," Harry said. He cast a look at Voldemort, who was merely patrolling around the dome of memories, and shrugged before letting his real sleep take over.

Harry woke up quickly the next morning; he heard a noise in the room. He felt something flying right at him and ducked to the right. Thankfully he dodged whatever it was but was blindsided from the left. With his glasses off he was at a distinct disadvantage. Surprisingly, they were put back on and he saw Tracey had tackled him. Lily was lying off to the right where her dive had missed, and Blaise was by the doorway snickering.

Harry was very suddenly made aware that he had a girl holding him, and he was equally aware that she was a pretty girl. His brain processed that while he hugged her, then flipped her, pinning her onto the bed. Tracey's blond hair covered her face and Harry blew air onto it, making her squirm underneath him. They looked at each other for a moment and everything suddenly paused. Her hazel eyes danced with mirth and she laughed before Harry was suddenly tackled by Lily, thus ruining the moment.

Harry caught himself staring at Lily as well, only in opposite positions, since she was on top. Similar blond hair cascaded on his face as Lily's blue-green eyes dared him to shake her off. The laughter died in her throat when she looked at Harry and the room suddenly became quieter.

There was a slightly awkward pause as the girls extricated themselves from Harry's bed sheets and he sat up, slightly disoriented. His glasses were put into his hand and he slipped them on before surveying the scene that was in front of him.

Blaise just gave him a bemused look while the two girls smiled. Harry shrugged and gave a cheerful hello to them both.

"We've missed you guys," Tracey said with a smile. Lily nodded vigorously. Harry reasoned that being petrified must have driven the two girls mad. A look at Blaise made Harry think he had reached a similar conclusion.

"So what are we going to do today?" Lily asked sweetly.

"I was thinking prank war..." Blaise said slyly.

The girls quickly declined. Blaise could be heard moaning about the unfairness of girls getting to decide what to do.

They ended up just sitting in the room and talking about their summers.

"Well, I went to my twin brothers' shop," began Lily. "It is really amazing. They already have it setup nicely and are picking up their entire inventory from different people all over the world. I met a witch from Rio de Janeiro!"

"Did they get anything good?" Blaise asked.

Lily gave him a scathing look.

"Of course they did. But you'll have to go for yourself."

"We can go when we talk to them about the cabinets," hissed Blaise to Harry.

"What electives are you taking?" Harry asked.

"I'm taking Arithmancy and Ancient Runes," Tracey said. Harry and Blaise winced.

"Both of them?" Blaise asked.

"Yes," she said firmly. "I want to create spells and those two classes are a good basis for that career."

"That makes sense," conceded Harry. "Good luck with that."

"Thanks. What about you guys?"

"Care of Magical Creatures and Ancient Runes," Harry said for the both of them.

"Well I'll have you for that class at least," Tracey said. Everyone looked expectantly at Lily.

"Care of Magical Creatures and Divination."

"Divination?" Harry asked in surprise. "Why would you want to do that?"

"Well if you were any good at the subject you would know why," retorted Lily.

"I think I'd have to be a mind reader, not a— err— diviner?" Harry asked, trailing off.

"Something like that," Lily said with a smirk.

"Well that should be entertaining," Blaise said.

"I wonder what Hermione is taking," Harry asked innocently, while catching Blaise's eye.

"Probably everything," Blaise said with a grin.

"I'm curious, Blaise, I didn't know you and Granger knew each other that well," Tracey said.

"Well, you were a bit out of commission all of last year, Trace," Blaise countered.

"That wasn't exactly my fault. Blame Lily. It was her idea to call me on the mirror."

"Hey!" Lily cried. "The only reason I called you on that thing was—"

"It's not important," Tracey said quickly. "Speaking of two-way mirrors, I heard Lily got you a pair for your birthday. Who'd you give the other one to?" she asked curiously.

"I was going to give it to Blaise, but he claimed to have gotten me a present then didn't send it with his letter..." Harry said. Blaise had the decency to look abashed.

"Damn! Knew I forgot something. Hang on, I know where it is. I'll be right back." Blaise rushed out of the room, only to return a couple moments later with a haphazardly wrapped package, which he thrust into Harry's hands.

"Well?" Blaise asked. Harry tossed him the other two-way mirror. Blaise grinned.

The girls stared in shock. "Well?"

"What?" Harry asked.

"Open it!" they said together.

"Oh. Right." Harry looked at the package and hefted it in one hand, trying to gauge what was inside it. He shook it a bit, then tried to figure out what Blaise had bought him.

"I have no idea what's inside, mate," Harry conceded.

"Of course you don't. There's an anti-peeking charm on it."

"I see," Harry said sagely.

"No you don't. The anti-peeking charm is on it."

Harry laughed. Tracey interrupted him though.

"Oh honestly!" She grabbed the present and tore off the paper for Harry, to the surprise of everyone there. She handed it back to him, blushing and mumbling an apology.

Everyone was quiet for a moment before they all burst out laughing, and Tracey joined them a moment later.

"So what is it?" Lily asked eagerly.

"I don't know," Harry said. "What is it, Blaise?"

"It's an anti-dark light. Now, it's not what you think," Blaise said quickly. "It's a light that can't be darkened." Everyone laughed. "That is what you thought it was? Oh well. Here's how you turn it on, see?" Blaise hit the on button, and nothing happened.

"What?" he said in surprise. He grabbed what looked like a flashlight and hit it a few times against his hand before he tried turning it on. Nothing happened.

Harry grabbed it and took a look. "Blaise, you bought a Muggle flashlight. It needs batteries."

The group (excluding Blaise, who looked confused as to why his light didn't work) shared another round of laughter.

Blaise threw it on the bed in disgust. "I'll get you something better next time."

"Alright then," Harry said cheerfully. Blaise finally chuckled.

"I guess it was funny, huh?" he asked.

"A bit," conceded Harry.

The four of them went downstairs to eat, and afterwards they could be found flying lazily in the backyard. Harry really enjoyed flying. It gave him a way to free himself from everything bothering him. He was regretting losing his Seeker spot for the first game.

"Should I try for Chaser?" Harry asked, while he flew by Blaise, hanging upside down in the air.

"Well you aren't Seeker the first game. If the Gryffindors win you'll get it back though. It's really up to you. We could always sabotage Malfoy's broom..."

"That idea has merit. The Gryffindors would be blamed for it. If he's tragically injured and can't play, then I would have to fill in as Seeker. He has to play though, because part of the deal with me getting that elf was that Malfoy would be Seeker for the first game."

"We can look into it."

"I like the way you think, Mr. Zabini."

"By the way, when are we doing that other prank on Snape that you wanted to do?"

"Ah, about that... I'll let you know when I did it. I'll get blamed for the prank anyway so it won't make much of a difference who does it."

By this point, the two of them were just floating in the air and Harry had righted himself, while Tracey and Lily were racing each other across the yard.

The four of them eventually flew back down and talked about inconsequential things before the girls had to go home, leaving Harry and Blaise to their own devices.

The rest of summer seemed to go by in a similar tone. Harry did begin to develop a bit of paranoia from staying too close to Mr. Zabini, but as Blaise pointed out: "It's not being paranoid if they're really out to get you."

Thankfully, the rest of the summer didn't turn out to be as frantic as the beginning had been, and Harry had merely wasted the days with Blaise, devising ways for the contraband shop to be born. So it was with a smile on his face that Harry welcomed the end of August and prepared for an eventful third year of Hogwarts.

The only thing on his mind that was troubling him, which he had told Blaise about, was not Riddle's massive Azkaban breakout, but which girl fancied him: Tracey or Lily?

Chapter 19: A Not So Triumphant Return

"Are you ready to go, Blaise, Harry?"

"Just a minute," Blaise called back. "Do we have everything?" he asked, looking around his room.

"I think so," Harry replied.

"Vanishing cabinets?" Blaise asked.

"Check."

"Cloak?"

"Check." Harry glanced at Blaise's table and saw something lying on it. He smirked. "Wands?"

"Che— damn." Blaise went back and grabbed his wand from his room. "How did I forget that?" he mused.

"I think we're good," Harry said finally.

"Yup. Let's get out of here. I'm sure Tracey and/or Lily may be anxious to see you again."

"Yeah, well maybe Millicent is looking for you too."

Blaise cringed. "That's low, Potter, even for you."

The duo, trunks in hand, headed to the portkey and arrived at Platform Nine and Three Quarters moments later. After a cheerful goodbye to Blaise's Mum, they boarded the train and found an empty compartment to wait for the girls in.

They had just settled themselves in when the door slid open. Harry had to turn his head quickly to keep from laughing.

"Hi Blaise," Millicent Bulstrode said cheerfully. Blaise screamed soundlessly. He pointedly turned towards the window, hoping she would get the hint. But Blaise underestimated Millicent's rather thick head.

"How was your summer?" she pressed on bravely, daring to take a seat next to him. Blaise turned towards her, but whatever he was going to say was lost on his tongue because her face was right next to him, waiting for an answer. He managed to make a yell this time and decided his best course of action was to run. So Blaise fled the compartment.

"Oh boo," Millicent said sadly. "He ran away again."

Harry stared at her incredulously. "You're kidding right?"

"What?" she asked innocently.

"You know Blaise doesn't like you right?" Harry said bluntly.

"Oh he does," she said, with a twisted sort of smile on her face that made Harry want to run away as well. "He just hasn't realized it yet." And on that note, Millicent left the compartment, leaving it colder than when she had entered it.

The door opened again of its own accord and revealed Daphne Greengrass, with a petrified looking Blaise hiding behind her.

"Is it safe?" he whispered to Daphne, tugging on the sleeve of her robe. She sighed and dragged Blaise in front of her.

"Yes," she said listlessly. "Hi Harry," she said a bit more brightly.

"Hey Daph," Harry said with a grin. "Ditch Astoria already?"

"Not for lack of trying," she said, sounding amused. Astoria popped her head out from the corridor and walked in, tossing herself on the seat next to Harry in exaggerated exhaustion.

"Wow," she said breathlessly.

"What?" Blaise asked, when it became apparent she wasn't going to elaborate.

"It smells like a mixture of you and Millicent. That's just gross." She stuck up her nose for further emphasis and Blaise lightly shoved her.

"That was uncalled for."

"Not after what you did to me in the hallway," she countered.

"I was hiding!" Blaise said defensively, his cheeks heating up.

"In my robes?" Astoria asked incredulously.

He made an odd noise in his throat that sounded vaguely non-committal.

"Hey guys!" called Lily. Tracey walked in behind her and sedately sat down, with a quiet hello, before burying herself in a book.

"You have Arithmancy homework already or what?" Harry teased.

Tracey pointedly ignored him and continued reading.

"So Daphne, what electives are you taking?" Harry asked.

"Ancient Runes and Care of Magical Creatures," she said shortly. Blaise and Harry let out a whoop.

"Excellent, we have those too," Blaise said with a grin. Daphne put her head in her hands and groaned.

A knock on their compartment door drew everyone's attention. The door opened, revealing Draco Malfoy, flanked by his usual pair of trolls: Crabbe and Goyle. Harry had never learned to distinguish between the two of them.

"Potter," Malfoy said coldly.

Harry looked up into the eyes of his fellow Slytherin, and was caught off guard by the emotions Malfoy's eyes were showing. He seemed almost respectful, and Harry had no idea why.

"Malfoy," returned Harry curiously. The temperature in the room dropped a few degrees.

"A word," he said, jerking his head out of the compartment. Harry caught Blaise's questioning glance and met it with a bewildered one of his own.

Harry stood up and followed Malfoy out of the compartment, into a nearby empty one. Malfoy cast a privacy ward and turned to face Harry.

"Now, if I were you, I would be out for Black's blood."

So that was what this was about. "Hmm," Harry said in a non-committal tone.

"From one Slytherin to another, I may hate you, Potter, don't get me wrong, but you've grudgingly earned my respect."

Harry was surprised Malfoy was making this admission.

"I don't want to see you getting killed by my Mother's cousin. I don't care for the man, I would like nothing more than to see him dead. So don't screw this up and get yourself killed in the process."

Harry felt like he wanted to laugh. He wisely refrained from doing so. "Believe me; I won't mess up an opportunity to avenge my parents." Malfoy nodded curtly.

"And Potter?"

"Yeah?" Harry asked, turning back around.

"If you need any help killing him, you know where to find me."

"Err— thanks Malfoy," Harry said. Malfoy nodded again, and took down the ward.

The two of them were about to exit when the lights went off on the train.

"What the hell?" cursed Malfoy. The two of them re-entered the compartment and Malfoy locked the door. Harry kept himself from making a sarcastic comment about the two of them locked in a compartment alone together. After all, if Malfoy was making an effort to be civil, Harry would let it go for now, at least until he found out what Malfoy wanted.

The train came to a sudden stop and the two of them were thrown back into the window. The window broke under their combined

pressure and the rain started pouring into their compartment. Harry and Malfoy both cursed as they got to their feet.

"What happened?"

"No idea," Malfoy snapped. They pointed their wands to the window and cast a reparo to fix it, but not before noticing shapes boarding the train.

"Is that someone boarding the train?" Harry asked, having to squint due to his bad vision. He pulled off his glasses to wipe the water off of them and replaced them on his head.

Harry attempted to take a breath but it seemed like the air was sucked out of his lungs. Malfoy began to look very pale next to him. Harry slumped into the seat and felt very weak. Images started flashing through his mind so fast he couldn't recognize all of them. All he felt was an immense pain in his chest, and a strong feeling of depression was beginning to overcome him.

The door to the compartment slid open, and Harry found himself staring at a cloaked figure, its face seemingly shrouded in mist. It reached a hand out from under the cloak and a rotten, scaly hand appeared, inching its way towards Harry's face. It gave his cheek a gentle caress, almost like a lover, and its other hand reached forward to do the same.

The dementor, which Harry realized with a start, took in a long rattling breath, sucking everything warm and positive out of the room. Malfoy was positively shaking and had resorted to biting his nails. He tried to inch his way out of the door but the dementor still had his path blocked. Harry felt Future-Harry take over his faculties. A wand was pulled out of Harry's robes, and it was raised shakily towards the dementor. It leaned in, to give Harry a kiss and steal his soul, but it wasn't fast enough.

Expecto Patronum, thought Harry, too tired to form the words aloud. A white mist appeared at the tip of Harry's wand, repelling the dementor away for the moment. It turned its focus to Malfoy, looking for easier prey. Harry collapsed on the seat. But at that moment their door opened again and the Patronus charm was cast by someone else, in a rough voice. The dementor was instantly repelled away

and it left, morosely, dropping Malfoy in an undignified heap on the floor.

Harry looked at the amber eyes of his savior. "Moony?" he whispered, before passing out. He missed the look that crossed the man's face as he fell into blissful unconsciousness.

When he came to, Harry realized hot chocolate was being poured slowly down his throat. He sputtered, and the cup was pulled back gently. He looked around and noticed he was back with his friends, and to his immense surprise Malfoy was seated next to him.

"Are you alright, Harry?" asked the man who was holding the cup.

"I'm fine," Harry said crossly, and tried to sit up further in his seat. A small smile graced the man's features.

"I'm Professor Lupin," he said by way of greeting.

"You don't look much like a Professor," said Malfoy bitterly. Professor Lupin turned his eye towards Malfoy and the blond was instantly reminded that he owed the teacher a life debt.

"I suppose I owe you a life debt then," Malfoy muttered, loud enough to be heard. "Thank you," he said quietly. He put his hand forward and shook it with Professor Lupin, before exiting the compartment stiffly.

"I need to speak with the conductor," Lupin said after a moment. "Be sure to finish that, and I'll have the lady on the trolley pass out some chocolate frogs."

With that, Lupin stood up and left, leaving the Slytherins alone in their compartment once more.

"So how do you know him, Harry?" Blaise asked.

"What?" Harry said blankly.

"Well he did talk to you in a pretty familiar tone," Lily commented.

"Must have been a friend of my father's," Harry said non-committally.

"More like your Grandfather's," Astoria said. "Did you see all his grey hair?"

Harry snorted. "He looks like one poorly aimed curse would finish him off. Not the best appearance for a Defense Against the Dark Arts Professor," commented Tracey, who was no longer reading her Arithmancy book. Daphne was now the girl reading a book.

"Well, he's better than Lockhart," Daphne said absently, her hand moving a stray hair from her face as she returned to reading. Blaise looked at her sharply, remembering that the two of them had technically disposed of Lockhart.

"Harry's owl is better than Lockhart," Astoria said dismissively.

"Speaking of Lockhart," Blaise began, "you never exactly explained to us what happened when you went to the chamber."

"I didn't?" Harry asked curiously.

"No," Daphne said shortly, her book now forgotten.

Harry ran a hand through his hair and sighed. He told them everything he remembered, from knowing how to get to the chamber, trying to use stairs to go down them, encountering Riddle, how he took Percy's soul to resurrect his younger self, and how he was imperiused and left the Chamber. That was all Harry remembered. There wasn't time for questions though, because they had arrived at school. Cursing, they all changed into their robes as fast as they could and left the train just before it started to leave again.

Astoria left to go with her friends so the five of them grabbed a carriage to themselves and were promptly joined by Hermione.

The girls greeted her politely, if a bit stiffly, while Blaise kissed the top of her hand dramatically. Apparently, Blaise had a friendship with the Gryffindor Muggleborn as well.

"How was your summer, Hermione?" Harry asked.

And Harry was treated to Hermione going on and on about some European place the Grangers visited. Blaise kept a running

commentary going under his breath. When Blaise asked her what her parents did for a living, she went into great detail about dentists.

All the rest of the members of the carriage winced every time she brought up specific details of what her mum and dad did.

"So your parents are Muggle torturers?" Daphne asked, horrified.

Hermione laughed. "No, no not at all. They just fix teeth."

"Sounds like its worse than a lot of dark curses I've seen," Blaise said with a shudder.

Harry tried to tune it all out and take stock of his mental surroundings— the dementor had triggered some intense memories— but it was too loud for him to concentrate. Finally they reached the castle, and more importantly, silence.

Harry liked Hermione's company well enough, but when you wanted to just sit and enjoy the quiet and she wanted to talk— Harry shuddered. At least now he could sit in silence and think about what happened to him today.

"Mr. Potter, Miss Granger, a word please?" Professor McGonagall said, stopping them on their way to the Great Hall. Harry had been that close.

The two of them followed, Harry a bit reluctantly, although Blaise promised to save him a seat, and Harry was left to wonder what she wanted him for.

He was answered by Madam Pomfrey. "They sent an owl that you had taken ill on the train, Mr. Potter. Dementors! Honestly! What will the Ministry think of next? Dragons?"

"Careful what you wish for, Madam Pomfrey," Harry said with a grimace. He did not want to go up against a dragon. Although he figured Hagrid would be happy.

"And I'm fine. Honest," he added hastily, when she still eyed him disbelievingly. Of course, every student she encountered would say they were fine, if only to escape her evil clutches.

"Well at least have some chocolate," she said briskly.

"Professor Lupin already gave me some," Harry countered.

"Did he really?" she asked curiously. "Finally, a Defense Professor with some common sense. Well, alright then, Mr. Potter, go on. I don't want you in my hospital wing this year, is that clear?"

"Crystal," Harry said, before snapping off a salute. He got away as fast as possible, although he did remember Hermione. He wondered what McGonagall had wanted with her. But not a moment later, a beaming Hermione Granger appeared with the Head of Gryffindor house in tow.

"See to it that you are, Miss Granger," finished McGonagall. Hermione's head bobbed up and down faster than Dobby's and she joined up with Harry as they headed to the Great Hall.

"Everything alright?" Harry asked.

"Better," Hermione said with a grin.

"Well if you aren't going to tell me..." Harry trailed off. Hermione's lips remained firmly closed. Harry sighed.

"Keep your secrets. See you later," Harry said, as the doors swung open and he headed towards his seat. Blaise had saved him the corner seat nearest to the door. It gave him a nice view of the whole Hall, so anyone approaching him could easily be spotted. It was the perfect seat if you were paranoid. It also allowed Harry to slip into his seat unobtrusively. He greeted Tracey, who smiled back, Lily, who was in the middle of devouring her food, and Daphne, who was still reading, before settling in.

"How was the Sorting?" Harry asked, simultaneously grabbing some chicken off the plate to eat.

"Same old," Blaise said with a shrug.

"Any Slytherins we should know?" asked Harry, as he bit into his food.

"Not really," Blaise said, uninterested. He was busy writing a letter.

"Took you long enough," said Tracey.

"Well, Pomfrey wouldn't let me escape her evil clutches."

Tracey let out a snort. "You missed the new Care of Magical Creatures Prof."

"Really, who is it?" Harry asked, taking a drink from his goblet.

"Hagrid—" the drink Harry had been trying to swallow was spat back out.

"Wha— sorry— WHAT? Dumbledore made Hagrid a Professor?"

"Yup," grinned Tracey.

"Of Care of Magical Creatures?" continued Harry in disbelief.

"Yup," Tracey said, her grin becoming broader.

"He'll kill us all," moaned Harry.

"Yup," agreed Tracey in the same annoying tone.

"I don't think you understand, the man thought a Cerberus was harmless, and that dragons were misunderstood. Is Dumbledore insane?"

"Yup," Tracey said again, which was driving Harry mad.

"Can you say anything besides yup?" he asked in mock frustration.

Tracey's grin became even bigger. "Yup." Harry sighed and turned away from Tracey.

"I wonder who the new Quidditch Captain will be," Harry said to no one in particular.

"Flint," Tracey said shortly, now deciding to be serious.

"What? He should have graduated already," Harry said, confused.

"Nope, the dumb Troll failed. He has to retake the year."

"Damn," Harry muttered.

"I was thinking the same thing," groaned Tracey. "I was going to try out for his spot as Chaser."

"I guess it will be Warrington, Montague, Flint, Bole, Derrick, Bletchley, and Malfoy," Harry commented to no one in particular.

"More than likely. Although I heard Pucey had wanted Flint's Chaser position too," Blaise replied.

"That should be an interesting battle," said Harry looking at Tracey appraisingly. She glared back at him. "That you would win," amended Harry. Her glare softened.

"That's better."

"Hey cut me some slack. I got you those gloves didn't I?"

"I haven't hexed you, have I?" she asked cheekily.

Harry threw his hands up. "Forget it. You're impossible to talk to. Blaise, what are you writing?"

Blaise glared. "Nice of you to call attention to it," he whispered. "It's my proposition letter to the Weasley twins. For our, you know," Blaise said. Harry nodded intelligently.

"You've got their names spelled wrong."

"What? No I don't."

"Yeah, put Messrs. Gred and Forge Weasley. They'll be more interested in the offer. And make sure I'm connected to the offer too."

"Why?"

"They like me."

"Why?"

Harry paused. "Good question. Just take what we can get, ok."

"Yeah, okay," Blaise muttered, adjusting the letter accordingly. He tapped it with his wand, turning it into a small bird, and it flew off towards the Gryffindor table, before depositing itself in between the twins. Blaise resumed eating casually, and Harry turned his attention to Daphne.

"You're still reading?" Daphne's cheeks turned slightly red. She brushed hair out of her face and Harry noticed the necklace he had bought her. Apparently, the green stone was a good buy. It twinkled merrily in the light of the Great Hall.

"I'm up here, Potter," Daphne said with a grin. Harry raised his gaze unabashedly.

"But the view was much better down there," he trailed off suggestively. She swatted him.

"Shut up." But the smile and slight blush gave her away.

"I was actually looking at the necklace I gave you if you must know," Harry said. Daphne fingered it lovingly.

"It's really beautiful," agreed Daphne.

An owl interrupted their conversation at the moment. Actually, multiple owls did. Daily Prophet, special edition. Maybe now Harry would discover why the dementors were interfering... After all, Fudge said he released them didn't he? The first article was exactly what he was looking for.

Evidence False! One of the Releases is Wanted!

Daily Prophet Correspondent Rita Skeeter

It was discovered earlier this morning that some of the evidence provided in the highly controversial release of four high-security prisoners from Azkaban was falsified. The testimony used to clear Sirius Black was inconclusive and discovered to have been tampered with prior to its viewing. A warrant is now out for Sirius Black's arrest. Head auror Rufus Scrimgeour believes that Black

somehow managed to break into the Ministry during the review of evidence and change it to suit his needs. This was further cemented by two aurors who were attacked in the Records Department.

One auror, John Dawlish, claims that Black is going on to Hogwarts now. As it is apparent he was guilty of his previous crimes, we now must look to protect our children from the mass murderer, devious enough to escape, and deranged enough to attack the Ministry.

Minister Fudge has stated that the safety of our children is of the utmost importance, and has placed Dementors to guard Hogwarts and ensure that Black is unable to harm anyone who is there. We only hope he can be brought to justice swiftly.

For more on Black and his crimes, see page 3

They resumed eating and once they were finished, the headmaster called out.

"If I can now have your attention," called Professor Dumbledore.

Conversations halted, as everyone looked up expectantly.

"I want you all to be made aware that Hogwarts will be playing host to the Dementors of Azkaban, until such time as Sirius Black has been captured. Please don't cause them any trouble, and they should leave you alone. But beware, Dementors do not understand the concept of innocence, nor is it in their nature to listen to pleas, so do not find yourself trying to sneak by one. If you stay away from them, then everything will be fine. We must all be vigilant to make sure no one is unnecessarily harmed. But do not worry, the teachers and the Ministry have everything under control," Dumbledore said abruptly with a small smile. "Get a good night's rest and be ready for classes tomorrow, so we can begin to remind you of the many things you have forgotten over summer," he said with a true smile, and the prefects led the first years to the dorms, while everyone else stood up and headed back to their common rooms as well.

"Well that's going to make the vanishing cabinets that much more important," Harry said to Blaise as they walked to the dungeons.

"And make our products that much more in demand," Blaise said with a grin.

"When did you ask to meet with the Weasley twins?" Harry asked.

"Tomorrow after lunch. I said we would have a business proposal for them."

"Nicely phrased."

"Naturally."

"Do we have any Ravenclaw or Hufflepuff contacts?" Harry asked.

"Not really," he said, trailing off. "Would they be interested in buying things you think?"

"Depends on how you market it."

"Fair enough. We'll get some intellectual junk for the Ravenclaws, and we'll get the Hufflepuffs..."

"Food?" Harry suggested with a laugh.

"That has potential," Blaise grinned.

"Yeah we could sell them food from the kitchen."

"That's practically next to their common room isn't it?"

"They don't necessarily know that," retorted Harry.

Blaise let out a laugh of his own. "Hufflepuffs really don't have any uncommon traits, besides being common, do they?"

"Uncommonly common, the Hufflepuff Badgers," dead-panned Harry. "Don't underestimate the power of groups though," warned Harry. "Imagine if you got all that loyalty united behind one person."

"Especially if it was blind, unwavering loyalty," continued Blaise thoughtfully.

"A Hufflepuff for a Dark Lord, you never know..."

"Good one, Harry. Slytherins are always the Dark Lords; we have a monopoly on that."

"You're joking right?"

"Of course," Blaise said. "There's some fairly Dark Ravenclaws. According to some Slytherins, Dumbledore is a Ravenclaw Dark Lord disguised as a benign Gryffindor. But everyone knows there's no such thing as a benign Gryffindor. You've got better luck at finding a Muggleborn Slytherin."

"You reckon we have any Muggleborn Slytherins?" Harry asked suddenly.

"They aren't exactly going to be parading that around the common room are they?" Blaise pointed out.

"Good point," conceded Harry.

They walked into the common room and headed straight up to their familiar dorm room, which now proudly proclaimed "third years" above it.

"We need to start planning how to approach the Weasleys about this," Blaise commented idly, after jumping onto his bed.

"Yeah, I'm thinking we should make it sound like they're privileged we're considering them."

"Naturally," Blaise replied.

"We still need to talk to Pollux and Castor though."

"This is true," mumbled Blaise.

"I've already got one connection though, through my Father."

"You never really explained that to me," Harry said haltingly.

"I never really planned to," Blaise said firmly.

An awkward silence followed.

"Nothing personal, Harry. It's just not my story to tell."

Harry remained quiet for a moment.

"You understand, it's not my secret."

And when Harry thought about it, he really did understand it. You didn't go around telling other people's business to someone, even if that someone was your best friend. Especially when the person was your family, although Harry could really only imagine that loyalty, as his own family wasn't exactly a family, in the strictest sense of the word.

"No, I understand, Blaise. Maybe some other time you can tell me," Harry said, trailing off.

"Eventually," Blaise said in a strained voice.

A change of topic was in order, decided Harry.

"So, I wonder how the classes are going to be," mused Harry.

"Care of Magical Creatures will probably be entertaining," commented Blaise. "As for Ancient Runes..."

"A lot of work?"

"A lot of work," agreed Blaise.

"Brilliant..." sighed Harry.

"Well I'm going to sleep. Night, Harry."

"Night, Blaise." But Harry wasn't going to sleep just yet. He lay on his bed, waiting until the rest of his dorm mates entered. Crabbe and Goyle wandered in and landed straight onto their beds before snoring loudly about ten minutes later. Nott and Malfoy were a bit more respectable when they came in and went to sleep. Harry snuck out thirty minutes after that, throwing the invisibility cloak over himself, before making his way to the Chamber of Secrets.

He managed to avoid getting into trouble his first day back and found his way into Myrtle's bathroom without any complications.

She was presumably somewhere in the U-bend crying, or else Harry briefly entertained himself with the thought of her flirting with one of the other ghosts, before he hissed at the sink and let the Chamber open up to him. He tried hissing stairs again, but to no avail. With a sigh, he jumped down and cast a cushioning charm as he landed, and a cleaning charm once he stood up.

He once again walked swiftly towards the basilisk waiting beneath the depths of the school. After reaching the final door and hissing it to open, Harry began to approach the resting place of the King of Serpents.

"Great King of Ssserpentsss," hissed Harry in parseltongue, "I have returned to humbly requeessst an audience with you."

Harry waited patiently and after a few minutes the basilisk appeared from the mouth of a Salazar Slytherin statue. It glared at Harry—which was all the more menacing since its looks could kill, and waited for Harry to continue. Harry got the impression it was not very patient, so he began speaking quickly and to the point.

"King basssilissk, I have come here to assk for your help."

"With what, young two legsss?" Harry knew he would have to be the ideal Slytherin here, better than the real Salazar Slytherin even. It would take a lot of cunning, and he had to speak correctly, or else the basilisk would simply kill him. Its gaze might not work but its poison could certainly do the job. To be totally honest with himself, Harry thought he might have acted a bit too rashly. He wasn't prepared to speak to the basilisk. He didn't know what he was going to say, how he would phrase his requests. He turned himself over to the mercy of Future-Harry, who was currently going over some of Voldemort's memories to help them recruit the great snake.

"You are the one who sssmellsss like Tom Riddle." Harry merely nodded, and hoped the basilisk did not owe its allegiance to Voldemort already. He let Future-Harry dictate his actions, and heard the words leaving his mouth that weren't his, but they were his at the same time.

"What do you know of Tom Riddle?" Harry queried.

"He isss a dessscent of my creator, Massster Sssalazar, after whom I am named. I remain loyal to the noble line of Ssslytherin."

Brilliant, Harry thought.

"Then that loyalty would extend to me," Harry commented. The basilisk tasted the air with its tongue, letting out a soft hiss.

"If you are part of the Ssslytherin line, yesss."

"Tom Riddle has rejected hisss Ssslytherin heritage. He hasss taken the sssurname Voldemort," Harry stated calmly.

It had the desired effect.

"He isss rejecting the noble Ssslytherin line?" roared the basilisk. "Tom Riddle mussst be killed."

"Will you help me kill him?"

The basilisk sniffed the air again. "No, you mussst die. Part of Tom Riddle isss in you."

Crap, Harry thought. That wasn't what he had in mind. "I am not rejecting my Ssslytherin heritage," Harry said quickly.

"Isss your sssurname Ssslytherin?" Damn, the snake was good. Belatedly, Harry wondered if he could claim the title of Lord Slytherin, by virtue of Voldemort's soul residing in his body. But Harry's eyes were still focused warily on the basilisk.

"We don't have a phoenix or the sword of Gryffindor, do we?" Harry thought to Future-Harry. He received a snort in response.

"It's not like I knew one was coming to help me when I faced it." Future-Harry was enjoying this. He obviously had faith in Harry's ability to handle a basilisk. Harry's time was up though. The basilisk took his silence as a no and lunged at him. Harry rolled quickly away and pulled out his wand.

He tried to think frantically, but this basilisk wasn't blind, so he was constantly on the move. Harry dodged bites and weaved between pillars, searching for something to transfigure into a makeshift sword.

He spotted a statue that was broken and ran to it, ready to grab the arm and transfigure it, when the basilisk's tail slammed into him and sent him skidding across the chamber. Ironically, he landed in the spot where Astoria had once resided.

He stood up, wincing, and the basilisk glared at him, apparently angered Harry was still alive.

"You die here, and then Tom Riddle will die after you." The basilisk lowered its head to end Harry's life, and almost decapitated him. Harry had the intelligence to duck, and the basilisk's ending up snapping its mouth at Harry, and the fangs gleamed menacingly in the dim light.

Harry had a few seconds to think. He moved behind a statue while the basilisk regained its bearings and took stock of himself. His left leg seemed to be broken, and his left hand was definitely fractured. He cast the spell to turn the statue-arm into a sword, similar to the matchstick to needle spell they learned in first year, only a bit more powerful of course, but he was out of energy at the moment. It remained an arm.

He put the arm in his right hand and held his wand loosely in his left. He leaned heavily against the back of the statue and tried to think. He wasn't prepared to fight a full-grown basilisk.

"I know you're there," hissed the basilisk. "Do you hear that sssound?" hissed the basilisk again anxiously, almost caressing the word. And Harry did hear it. He was reminded of the killing curse, the sound of death's wings, rushing towards its victim.

"It isss the sssound of inevitability— it isss the sssound of your death!" cried the basilisk.

Harry tried the spell one more time and the arm seemed to grow a bit sharper. The basilisk turned the corner and sank its fangs into Harry's arm, the one holding the statue-arm, and he dropped it in agony. Harry fell to the floor and rolled to the side, dodging the next attack, and summoned the arm back. He grimaced and cast a cleaning charm at the wound in his arm, and then after wincing, vanished the interior of his left arm. All that remained was flesh, and his left arm was completely white. The blood and venom had both disappeared, so Harry wasn't in danger of immediate death.

Harry took another short breath, and cast a switching charm, looking away in disgust as his flesh arm appeared on the floor and the arm from the statue appeared where his left arm was. He modified it as best he could to make it into a sort of sword-arm, and prepared to face the basilisk again.

It lunged at Harry but this time he was ready. He batted away the fang and managed to gouge out one of the eyes. The basilisk pulled itself away and let out a roar of pain, thrashing its head in the air. Unfortunately, Harry's sword-arm was still impaled in the snake's eye, so Harry was pulled into the air and thrown about as well. The basilisk managed to shake the sword out of its eye and Harry flew about thirty feet before slamming into the statue of Salazar Slytherin.

He shattered the statue and hit the floor painfully behind it, bouncing once before coming to a stop. This fight was not going the way Harry intended. He needed to end this quickly. What was the best way to kill a basilisk?

Harry heard Future-Harry snort inside his mind.

"What the bloody hell is so amusing?" Harry thought.

"You're obviously not meant for Ravenclaw," Future-Harry said back smugly.

Harry stopped breathing. He was the stupidest person alive. About to be dead to boot.

"What's the conjuring spell for a rooster?" he asked bitterly.

Future-Harry thought for a moment and answered him, and the spell was suddenly at the forefront of his mind. How the hell do you pronounce that?

"Scurr Bea Kellagh? What language is that?" Harry asked.

"Gaelic, that's how most conjuring spells are created. We can get into the theory behind that later. You can use other languages, but Gaelic is one of the strongest magical languages and makes the casting easier to do. It's N.E.W.T. level, so I don't know if you can

manage it..." trailed off Future- Harry, although it sounded more like a challenge.

"There's no point in telling me something is impossible, I've defied the laws of possibility more times than should be possible. The rules don't seem to apply to me."

"If Snape could only hear you now..."

The roar of outrage from the basilisk stopped further conversation and Harry cast the spell to conjure a rooster. It worked and the basilisk turned the corner, but froze upon seeing the rooster.

Its one eye focused on Harry and a foreign emotion was shining through: fear.

The silence was deafening. It lasted longer and longer.

"Crow you stupid bird!" Harry shouted. The basilisk stared at the rooster and caught its eye. Harry's conjured rooster died and vanished back into nonbeing.

"Now you die..." hissed the basilisk. Harry hastily cast the conjuration spell again, pointed his wand back at the twice damned rooster, and intoned "Imperio."

The sensation of casting an unforgivable curse was intoxicating, and Harry had to fight for control over Voldemort, who had perked up from the use of the magic most dark. The spell worked successfully, as Harry wanted nothing more than to fully control his rooster's every action.

"Crow," Harry whispered. And it did. Harry waited for the climactic moment to end with the basilisk dying, collapsing onto the chamber, and for him to make the bloody trek back to the Hospital Wing and patch himself up, and become an Unsung Hero of sorts.

But today wasn't Harry's day. Apparently, a conjured rooster was not a real rooster, so its crow did not kill the basilisk. The basilisk seemed surprised that it wasn't dead. Harry's rooster vanished after Harry gave up controlling it and the two opponents faced each other once more.

"Thiss endsss tonight," the basilisk hissed.

"I know," replied Harry casually.

"I will be long gone from here and you will be dead," it stated.

"You're blinded by your arrogance," Harry said. "It will be your downfall."

The basilisk roared in righteous anger and retaliated by trying to bite Harry again. Harry answered by stabbing the basilisk through the other eye, twisting it and ensuring it was completely gouged out. His sword-arm was severed from his body though, and remained stuck in the eye. Harry reattached his useless left arm and held his wand forward, prepared to strike against the basilisk.

"I can sssee you," the basilisk hissed in a low and pain-filled voice.

Harry was startled by that admission. The basilisk, although blinded, was still staring right at Harry.

"It isss time for you to die," Harry said regretfully. "Sssectumsssemptra!"

The normally powerful dark curse was overcharged by Harry's slight parseltongue accentuation, and the jet of light hit the basilisk directly at its neck, severing it from its body completely. It crashed to the floor in an undignified heap, its bloody eyes staring unblinkingly at Harry from their position on the floor.

Harry sagged to the floor himself, his body weary from the magic he used and his many injuries.

"Thanks for all the help back there," Harry thought to Future-Harry, sincerity laced with every word.

Future-Harry gave back what could only be interpreted as a cheeky grin. "A Gryffindor and a Slytherin make a pretty good team, huh?"

Harry let out a laugh, which quickly turned into a cough, and blood appeared on the floor.

"I need to get out of here," Harry muttered. Each step seeming to take ages, Harry slowly trudged up towards the exit, but collapsed. He heard a noise of something scraping on the stone floor, and he watched as someone approached him. Too tired to do anything, Harry held his wand out weakly but didn't attack.

The stranger, who was leaning on a sword, which upon further inspection was the sword of Gryffindor, limped over to Harry and helped him up.

"Up you get," and Harry suddenly realized he was talking to himself.

"Hermione has that bloody time-turner doesn't she?" Harry said aloud, before sagging against the new arrival.

"Yeah, and you'll need to get it, pick up the sword of Gryffindor, and get some basilisk venom on it. Let me do that real quick, and I'll help you out of here."

Harry could only nod as he watched himself get to work. The sword, now imbued with basilisk venom, was tied securely at the waist, and Harry was led to the hospital wing.

He was handed some pain potions for the moment just to make sure he could get through the initial task at hand, and was sent to retrieve the time-turner.

Harry limped his way towards the Gryffindor common room, his head a mess from the headache created by the damned time travel. There were two time-turners right now, but there was only one. The sword he could handle, there was only one of those, but the time-turner was a mess. Harry made it to the portrait of the Fat Lady, and it was propped open already. He walked inside, reached the girl's staircase, levitated himself upstairs, which thankfully didn't breach the alarm, and stealthily entered the girl's dormitory. He stunned Hermione with a whisper, summoned the time-turner, and left the room, levitating himself back down.

He exited the Gryffindor common room, taking care to keep it propped open still, and turned the time-turner back once. He headed up to Dumbledore's office, managed to enter on his second guess of the password (Chocolate Frogs), and headed up the winding staircase.

Fortunately for Harry, Dumbledore was at the moment meeting with Professor Snape, discussing the ramifications of the diary from last year and any information Snape had managed to obtain about it, so the office was empty. Harry put the Sorting Hat on his head and asked politely for the Sword of Gryffindor, repeating "help me," over and over again in his mind. The sword thankfully appeared and Harry replaced the hat on its shelf, before making his way back to the Chamber.

He met up with his past self and the conversation was identical to what he remembered. Once they made it to the Hospital Wing and his past self left to the common room, Harry followed. After his past self retrieved the time-turner, Harry went back and replaced it in a similar manner, only he had to slip the necklace back around Hermione, which was no problem as she had just been stunned. He quietly enervated her, but not strong enough to force her back to consciousness. A brief smile flickered on the face of his bushy haired friend and Harry left her to the dreams she was having.

He returned back to the Hospital Wing and found an irate Madam Pomfrey waiting for him, holding up the blood-soaked sheets he had stained when getting medicine for his past self.

"Mr. Potter! What is the meaning of this?" Harry sighed.

"Can I just get the healer-patient confidentiality and you heal me? I'll explain tomorrow."

Poppy huffed and began to tend to his wounds, ripping Harry a new one when she analyzed his left arm. Harry told her haltingly what happened.

That day, Harry had faced a dementor and a basilisk, but he was more frightened by the scream of rage that Madam Pomfrey let out when he told her he vanished everything in his left arm.

She screamed at him for his irresponsibility until Harry passed out from his lack of energy. That didn't stop her from continuing to yell though, and she made Professor Binns realize he was actually dead from the racket she was making.

The last thing he said before he passed out was, "Didn't know how much you cared, Poppy," and about twenty minutes later, when she finally realized what Harry had said, her expression softened, and she force-fed him skele-gro, blood replenishment potions, and a dreamless sleep potion.

Harry encountered Future-Harry when he passed out and had entered his mind, and the two of them sat down to have a conversation about the Wizarding World and the theory of magic.

"So Gaelic is one of the stronger languages?" Harry asked.

"That and Celtic, and the rumors of the language of Atlantis sets their runes as the strongest of any magic, stronger even than Merlin's form of Welsh runes."

"But you can use other languages?"

"Naturally," Future-Harry nodded. "Just consider someone tells you something. When you translate it, some of the meaning is lost, and you may have to add more description or emphasis to keep the same meaning. If you were to translate it a second time, the same thing would occur. By using Gaelic, you are more precisely saying what you want. We could have used Latin, which is a fairly common spell language now, but it would have required more intricate knowledge of the spell, and I don't remember how to say rooster in Latin."

"So could you theoretically say the spells in English?" Harry asked.

"It would require too much power to be practical," Future-Harry said. "But yes, you technically could. Magic is first and foremost intent. You have to truly believe and want the spell you are going to cast to work. You have to be confident and assertive in asking magic what you want it to do, like changing a part of a statue into a sword, or even casting the Imperius curse. Intent is everything. Following that, the wand helps you to focus your intent and channel your magic through a single point, making it more controllable and more likely to work. Wandless magic is possible, but again, it requires too much power for constant use. A simple spell like lumos would drain as much energy as five rapidly cast bludgeoning hexes. Something like a summoning charm— which can be very useful— would be akin to

fighting off the effects of a stunning spell. It can be done, but it takes a lot of power, so most people don't bother with it."

"Were you ever able to do wandless magic?"

Future-Harry grinned. "Twice."

"So why don't they create easier spells that are more closely translated and don't lose the same effect?"

"Well, the other thing you have to understand— and it took me awhile to figure it out— wizards are extremely lazy. They believe themselves superior to Muggles because they have magic, so they always look to magic for solutions to all of their problems. The less effort required, the more often it is used. So now the Wizarding World is stuck in a backwards period. We are far behind the Muggles in technological and economical advances. The only true innovators are the Muggleborns and Half-Bloods, who weren't brought up indoctrinated in the Wizarding World system. Of course with Voldemort threatening anything not Pureblood, the Purebloods have taken more control of the Wizarding World. The Wizengamot? There are a total of four Half-Bloods that are seated there, and no Muggleborns. The Half-Bloods are only there because they are from very old families that recently mixed with Muggleborns. Thus, they are classified as Half-Bloods by the Pureblood standards, since a Muggle within two generations disqualifies you as a Pureblood."

"Sounds like a thoroughly backwards and disillusioned government."

"You have no idea. There are more under the table dealings, bribes, negotiations, and threats in Britain's Wizarding Government than any of the other magical governments combined. We are scorned at the international Wizarding Conventions because of how corrupt our society is. Dumbledore is the only one that keeps us even slightly respected because of that mess with Grindelwald. They don't dare insult him. After he died though, the other nations refused to help us, basically believing we were reaping what we had sown. And they were ultimately right."

"Isn't Dumbledore part of these under handed dealings, and manipulations? All for the greater good of course," Harry added scathingly.

"You're a bit harsh on Dumbledore," Future-Harry commented. "You like to believe the worst in people. The exact opposite of Mum, actually."

"If you believe the worst in people, you'll never be disappointed," Harry countered.

"I don't know what exactly Dumbledore has done in regards to manipulations, you would have to look it up yourself. I can wager that it would be buried under a thicket of misdirection, half-truths, and outright lies though."

"What a tangled web we weave," quipped Harry.

"In essence," Future-Harry conceded. When you look that up, we can start explaining the economic status of the Wizarding World. I was— acquaintances— with a goblin at one point, and after looking through all of Voldemort's memories that we have access to— which aren't a lot but are substantial— I managed to learn a little of this and a little of that. Like with the government system, that was from Voldemort mostly. He had been engineering a way to take over the government— he actually succeeded in what would have been my seventh year. He proved that the people listen to the government and the press over their own logic and reasoning. Of course, fear has a large part to play in that as well."

"Fear does make people do stupid things."

"So does firewhiskey."

They both laughed. "I'm going to sleep. I think Poppy just force-fed me a Dreamless Sleep potion."

"You need it," Future-Harry said. "We'll continue this discussion some other time."

"Alright," Harry said, and he let the darkness wash over him.

Chapter 20: An Organized Mess

Harry woke up with a groan as the light flooded his eyelids. He never enjoyed waking up in the Hospital Wing and this time was no exception. Harry experimentally flexed his left hand and was grateful that it appeared to be back to normal. He took careful stock of the rest of his body. His leg felt better, his head no longer had a throbbing bruise, and he felt like his blood had been restored, so he was no longer pale. The last was just a guess, of course.

He looked around, noticed Madam Pomfrey was there, and called to her.

"Yes, Mr. Potter?" she asked.

"Can I leave?" Harry pleaded, uncaring of the whining tone his voice had taken.

"You never did tell me the whole story of what happened to you," she chided.

"I did," argued Harry. "It was a switching spell after I vanished everything in my arm. It could happen to anyone. And then I was having a sword fight. So can I leave?"

Madam Pomfrey sighed before shaking her head. "Of all the ridiculous stories," she whispered. She almost called him James but caught herself.

Harry was watching the matron and to his surprise, Madam Pomfrey gave him a small smile. "Yes, you may."

"Please? I promise I'll – wait what?" Harry paused, his brain taking time for her statement to sink in.

"You can leave, Harry, and try not to get back here again. I may have to give you your own bed if you keep this up." Harry smiled a true smile at her.

"I just enjoy your company, Poppy," he said cheekily, calling her by her first name as well.

"Get out of here," she said with a laugh, and Harry rushed to heed her command.

He headed down to breakfast while his muscles were still a little stiff and aching in protest. He made it just in time to beat his fellow Slytherins down to the Great Hall and was happily eating some bacon when Blaise made his first appearance of the morning.

"You were up early," he commented.

"Long story," Harry muttered. Blaise grinned.

"Those are the best ones."

Blaise helped himself to some food as well and the two ate in companionable silence as they waited for their schedules and housemates.

They didn't have to wait very long, as a thoroughly disheveled Tracey Davis sat down next to Harry and grunted what passed for a good morning before beginning to eat. Her Arithmancy book appeared moments later and her head was buried in it. About a minute later Daphne arrived with Lily in tow, the two deep in conversation, and they sat opposite the three third years already there.

"We're having an intervention," whispered Lily to Harry and Blaise conspiratorially. She jerked her head at Tracey. "She was reading all night. That's not safe. She's turning into Granger." Blaise and Harry both twitched and laughed outright when across the hall, Hermione Granger had adopted a similar look and posture to the girl seated near them, only the book she was poring over was Ancient Runes, which Blaise and Harry recognized from glancing at the covers of their own books but never opening them.

"When are we doing it?" Harry asked curiously.

"After classes today," Lily whispered.

"Her hair looks fantastic though," commented Daphne.

"That was rude," snapped Lily.

"No, she dyed it brown," amended Daphne. "Astoria had wanted to dye her hair back to black again, but I think she's staying with the dirty blond."

"It's a good look for her. Goes well with her eyes."

"Blue eyes go well with any color, Lily."

"True," Lily said with a smile. Harry tuned them out. They were back to girl talk and he really didn't want to hear it.

"When are we talking to the twins?" Harry asked Blaise.

"After lunch, for the third time. Pay attention." Harry just grinned in response.

"You know, I'm curious about something, Blaise."

Blaise sighed melodramatically. "How unsurprising," he said very Snape-like. "What is it now, Potter?" he continued in the same tone. Harry choked back a laugh.

"Well, most Slytherins don't really have true, 'friends,' do they?" Harry asked.

Blaise gave him an appraising look. "Well, one of the unwritten rules here is: 'you don't do something unless there's something in it for you.' So you're friends with people in so far as you share common goals."

"So is our little group the exception?"

"Well, the girls generally always have ulterior motives. They will be friends with each other, but can turn in a heartbeat. But I think that's true across all houses," Blaise ended with a quizzical look on his face.

Harry laughed. "You think so?"

"No idea, I don't pretend to understand women. Strike my previous statement from the record. I don't want to be quoted on something I could be wrong about."

"So never quote you then," Harry stated.

Blaise glared half-heartedly. "Watch yourself, Potter." Harry grabbed Lily's mirror and held it up to his face.

"What am I watching for?" he asked cheekily. Blaise punched him. Harry put the mirror back with a laugh and then turned to Blaise.

"So would you say we're friends?" Harry asked. Blaise sent him another appraising look.

"For the most part, I consider you a best friend, Harry. At the moment."

"At the moment?" Harry asked, smiling now.

"Yup, you may do something to piss me off."

Harry just grinned and punched Blaise back in the arm. Some Slytherins just didn't understand the value of having a true friend.

"So what is our first class?" Harry asked Blaise.

"Ancient Runes with the Ravenclaws." Blaise recited. "Brilliant, hopefully some of them will know what they're doing. After that, is—" Blaise checked the schedule, "Charms, then lunch. We've got Care of Magical Creatures with the Gryffindors in the afternoon, and that's it. Potions isn't until Thursday again with the Gryffindors, and Transfiguration after it."

"When do we have Defense?" Harry asked curiously. Blaise looked back at the schedule.

"Tomorrow," he said with a shrug. "We have Herbology that day too. Astronomy is only Wednesdays now, that's nice," Blaise said.

They finished eating and headed off to the first class of the day, Ancient Runes.

Daphne and Tracey sat at the desks right in front of Harry and Blaise, and the four of them whispered quietly since they were near the back. The Ravenclaws as a whole had arrived early and ensured that they had all the front seats, leaving a divide between the front

and back of the room, almost reminiscent of a Potions class, only the line was north to south, rather than east to west.

Their Professor appeared a couple minutes later. Harry had never really seen her before, but it was unsurprising. She was a lot younger than Harry would have expected an Ancient Runes Professor to be. She had light black hair– the only way Harry could describe it– that seemed to be made of air. It just floated about her, giving her a mysterious but carefree look, as if nothing seemed to affect her. Her blue eyes seemed to agree. While there was a certain amount of determination in them, they still seemed friendly, merely focused on something that was there but you couldn't see.

"Good morning class," she said by way of greeting. The class chorused a reply. "I am Professor Aerilyn Ancomah, and I will be your Ancient Runes teacher. If you aren't taking this class, now would be a good time to leave," she said with a smile. No one moved; two full years at Hogwarts meant they were intelligent enough to find their way to the proper classroom. Slytherins and Ravenclaws at least– the same might not hold true for Gryffindors, as Blaise whispered to him. Harry held back a laugh.

"As I'm sure most of you have little to no idea what this class will entail, our first lesson will just be on teaching you what exactly this class is about. Would anyone like to take a guess at why the Runes you will be learning here are 'ancient?' Mr. Potter?"

Harry had raised his hand, wondering if the conversation he had with Future-Harry had anything to do with it.

"Because runes were only used in earlier times and the older languages, and now with the many translations it would take to turn the words into English the runes lose their power and may have different effects?"

"Are you asking me, or telling me, Mr. Potter?" Her eyes seemed to be dancing with mirth though.

"Telling," Harry said.

"That's mostly correct. Take two points to Slytherin. As Mr. Potter has said, runes were originally created in the older languages, such as Gaelic, Celtic, Nordic, Welsh, or Atlantean. They are called

Ancient Runes because of the language required to use, rather than the length of time that has passed since they were created. Different symbols can represent different things. For example, the rune eihwaz means defense. So if you were trying to make a ward for instance, this rune would be one you could use in setting the ward stone. This is getting a bit advanced, but you understand the basic concept. Magic brings to life the meanings of the runes, and the fact that it is something physical rather than a spell that is cast makes them that much stronger. Again, by trying to make a rune in English, the magic would be able to recognize it but would not have sufficient power to make action with it. And if the word in English is similar to a rune, then disastrous consequences could pass. For example, you use the letter x, it could be misinterpreted as the rune for trouble, which looks similar to an x, only the line is slightly crooked, as you can see," she said while drawing it for them on the board.

"That is in Anglo-Saxon, which we will cover in good time. Something you should know about runes, is that there are many versions of runic alphabets. Each has variations in names, shapes, meanings, and magical uses. The runes we use most frequently are the Elder Futharks, the Anglo-Saxon Futhorcs, and the Younger or Scandinavian Futharks. The runes are broken into three sections or groups of eight, called aett. The pronunciation is similar, as you can tell, and the plural form is aettir. Breaking the runes in groups helps to remember their order, and later you will see how this is significant to magic use. Some runes can be created as merkstaves, which literally means dark stick, and although that implies a dark meaning, this is not necessarily the case. When a rune is created inverted or reversed, it has a different meaning. It is not exactly the opposite of the original meaning, but is generally more negative. If a rune looks the same right side up and upside down, then these obviously can't be reversed."

"Are there any questions so far? This is the foundation of Runes and if you can't understand this then we need to have a talk."

"What are the uses of Runes?" A Ravenclaw asked.

Professor Ancomah smiled. "Good question. You already know of their uses in wards, but that was not their original purpose. Originally, runes helped to predict the future. Not in the sense of Divination class," she said quickly. "But in the sense of analysis. It would use your inner conscience to discover a cause and effect, and

predict the outcome. So you would essentially look at what has happened and what is happening, then find the logical progression of events. In the past, it was looked at as a spider web. Picture the spider web clearly in your mind. When you take the first step onto the web, the whole web will vibrate. This is similar to a decision. A decision you make will affect everything around you. Taken from the Norse, they had three Goddesses of note for this class, what has been, what is, and what shall be. Intertwining these three is fate, or *wyrd*. The important thing to know about fate, according to the Norse, is that it was not what was destined for someone to do, but what one was destined to do if they followed the same path. So obviously this type of future-telling isn't typical of the centaurs."

"But I'm straying off topic." She laughed a bit and fixed the class with a slightly bemused expression. "I may do that from time to time, so I will apologize. Although I'm sure getting me off topic is a goal for many Hogwarts students that take my class."

Harry noticed in amusement that the Ravenclaws looked for the most part horror stricken at the thought of preventing a professor from teaching. The Slytherins mostly filed the information away for future use.

"Well, go ahead and read the first chapter, it will mostly tell you what I told you, but in slightly more confusing terms. If you have what I said written down, you should be able to work through it fairly well. And I promise, if you can get the basics down, intermediate runes will be easier for you. Class dismissed."

With that, the Professor went back into her office while the majority of the class was still in their seats.

"Seriously?" Harry asked Blaise. They tentatively grabbed their things and left, Tracey and Daphne right behind them.

"So what'd you think of that?" Tracey asked as they headed back to their common room, still too early to go to Charms.

"I have a headache," mumbled Blaise.

"I can't wait," said Daphne excitedly.

"It sounds... interesting," Harry replied slowly.

"I was thinking that too," mused Tracey. "The Professor is nice enough."

"If a bit out there," muttered Blaise. Harry felt inclined to agree.

"I think the word you're looking for is airy," Daphne said politely. "But not airy in the sense of a pureblood heiress," she amended.

"More like not all there?" Harry asked.

"Not that either," she replied slowly. "I don't know." They shrugged and all decided to glance at their Charms book before they headed to class, if only to look like they knew what they were doing. Harry decided to have a quick chat with Future-Harry.

"You know anything about Runes?" Harry asked.

"About as much as Dudley does," Future-Harry replied. Harry almost snorted. "If Voldemort knows anything, we don't have those memories available."

There was a slight pause. "Damn, oh well. Thanks."

"I think we're due for another talk at some point, just to straighten up a few things."

"That's fine with me. Tonight?"

"Alright."

Harry returned back to his surroundings, feeling a bit smug that he could communicate so easily with his other self now. It came naturally, and he had a solid foundation on his mind. He could go into a trance fairly effortlessly now, but his mind was still completely vulnerable to competent attackers.

"Harry," Blaise said in exasperation.

"What?" Harry asked blankly.

"You zoned out on us. We need to head to class."

"Hey Blaise, let me run downstairs and get the mirrors, we can use them with the twins. They should be in my trunk." Blaise nodded while Harry quickly retrieved the mirrors.

The four of them headed to Charms, meeting Lily along the way. They grabbed seats together, although Daphne ended up partnered with Millicent, and Professor Flitwick showed up a few minutes later, looking very excited about the day's lesson.

"It's good to have you all back," Professor Flitwick said, bouncing on his toes. "Today will be a very entertaining lesson," he said with a grin.

"Go on, wands out then. We will be performing the color changing charm."

Harry laughed to himself. This was the first charm he saw someone try to perform. Granted, it was Ron Weasley using a poem instead of the actual incantation to make his rat turn yellow—

"Watch your language, Mr. Potter. That will be two points from Slytherin."

"Sorry," Harry muttered. But inside, he was seething. He had to find Scabbers, otherwise known as Peter Pettigrew. The memory had just clicked in his head, but he didn't know how he would get to the rat. It was always in Gryffindor Tower, and Harry couldn't get in there. He couldn't exactly ask Hermione to do it. This was getting complicated...

"Now, the incantation is *muto*, followed by the color you want to use. The wand movement is just a sweep to the right as you pronounce the charm, then a quick sweep back to the left. It's a fairly simple charm, and I find it good to get you back into the swing of things, now that term has begun."

Harry felt a tingling sensation on his arm and glanced at it. He groaned. Blaise had turned his arm Gryffindor scarlet. Harry retaliated in kind with Hufflepuff colors. Soon the whole class was filled with cries of *muto* followed by a jumble of colors, and many people began sporting different colored body parts. Harry guessed

Flitwick had told them to cast it on each other when he had zoned out.

Harry glanced at the Professor and laughed when he saw that Flitwick was now in Slytherin colors to match his students. The diminutive Professor took it all in stride and Harry was reminded fleetingly of Ollivander when he found a wand for a customer. He was literally beaming and it seemed like the class had all thrown Cheering Charms at him.

Flitwick split the class in half.

"Now, we're going to play a game to practice your spellcasting." Flitwick waved his wand and the majority of the desks vanished. The students' belongings were all banished to the back of the room. Some of the desks were enlarged and placed on their side, and a few of the desks were made to be like a barricade, going straight up to the ceiling.

"We will be playing a game. I've split you into two teams. Your objective is to hit your opponents with the color changing spell. When you are hit, you're out. The winning team will earn ten points for each person still in play, and the last person to be hit on the losing team will earn five points."

Harry was amused to note that he, Blaise, and Tracey were on the same team against Daphne and Lily. Harry looked at the rest of his team and took note of them. It was Blaise, Tracey, Harry, Crabbe and Goyle against Millicent, Malfoy, Nott, Daphne, Lily, and Parkinson.

"Your team," Flitwick indicated to Harry's side, "will have their last person needed to be hit twice for the game to end, since the sides are uneven." They nodded in understanding. Harry grimaced that their luck put them with Crabbe and Goyle, but it wasn't to be helped.

"Go," Flitwick cried. Harry and Blaise quickly moved behind one of the desks and fired off two quick color changing spells each, Harry's an orange and Blaise's a red. The colors would obviously want to be one syllable to make sure they could be cast faster. Harry's orange colored spells seemed to go a bit quicker since he ran on from one word to the next. "Mutorange," was how it came out. Unfortunately,

he missed and the wall he hit didn't look to be in good shape. Harry decided not to use orange anymore.

Malfoy and Nott were teaming up against Crabbe and Goyle and Crabbe had already been hit. Harry fired a red color at Nott, who wasn't looking towards Harry, and was pleased to see it meet his target. Nott, Crabbe— and Goyle, whom Malfoy had just managed to hit, were all out.

"Duck!" Blaise cried, grabbing Harry and pulling him down, the blue spell whizzing over his head. Tracey was fighting fiercely with Lily, the two of them ducking behind desks and dodging gracefully. Harry watched as Malfoy crept up the side and then hit Tracey with a blue charm. Harry fired a green one back at Malfoy, but he smirked and ducked, flipping Harry off in the process. Harry's did manage to hit Lily though, right in the face. Sputtering, she glared at Harry before walking off to the sideline, her face green, marking a stark contrast to her blond hair.

Harry and Blaise looked at each other and nodded, both running out the opposite way to outflank Malfoy. Blaise had managed to hit Millicent at the start of the casting, leaving Daphne and Malfoy left. Parkinson had presumably been hit by Tracey, although it was possible, but mostly unlikely, that Crabbe or Goyle had hit her.

Harry and Blaise had Daphne and Malfoy between the two of them and fired spell after spell, pounding the barricade until it was a mixture of many different colors. Daphne managed to throw a few back and Harry had to twist his neck awkwardly at the last second to dodge a yellow one he hadn't heard her cast.

Daphne then ran from her hiding place and Harry and Blaise both threw one, which she twisted and jumped to avoid, and the two boys were forced to dodge the other's spells lest they get knocked out by friendly fire. Blaise and Malfoy found themselves throwing spells and each of them managed to hit the other, eliminating both of them.

Harry now had to hit Daphne to win, and she had to get him twice. He decided to bring out a bit of his Gryffindor side and just charged her. Surprised, Daphne managed one spell, a pink one, that hit Harry right in the chest, but Harry's green one hit her right in the chest as well, ending the game.

He smiled cheekily, offering a hand to her, and Daphne stood up gracefully. She brushed at her pendant, which was now greener than usual, along with the rest of her chest area. Harry kept his eyes from straying too far down.

"You're lucky I had to get you twice," she said. Harry laughed it off.

"I wouldn't have done that otherwise."

Lily came up to Harry too. "You got so lucky you hit me," she said with a glare. "You were definitely aiming for Malfoy."

"If I was aiming for Malfoy I wouldn't have missed," Harry said confidently.

"Says he who blew the first ten shots he took at Malfoy," retorted Daphne. Harry laughed.

"Better lucky than good sometimes," Harry said with a shrug.

Flitwick dismissed them and the five of them headed to lunch, chatting about the game.

"You know," Blaise began thoughtfully, "I think Millicent let me hit her. I mean, who gets hit on the first shot?" he asked as they sat down to grab food and eat.

"She just wanted to be under your spell, Blaise," Harry said dreamily. The rest of them groaned at the pun.

"Harry, that was just— stop. Don't. That wasn't even funny," Blaise added.

"Yeah, you're right. She's already fallen for you anyway. And apparently you've fallen for her but just don't know it yet."

"What are you on about?" Tracey asked, looking up from her book, which she had opened again.

"Just repeating what Millicent told me." Harry explained. Blaise winced.

"She said that?" Lily asked, surprised.

"On the train," acknowledged Harry.

"That's not good," Blaise said worriedly.

"Not much you can do about it," Harry pointed out.

"I know," Blaise replied morosely, moving his food around his plate.

Lily and Daphne began whispering again, and Harry had a feeling they were planning the "intervention." So he deemed it safe to talk to Blaise about more— sensitive— subjects.

"You ready to take on the Weasley twins?" Harry asked.

"Yeah. I sent a letter off to the Moon twins too, so hopefully we'll be able to get some stuff from them."

"Brilliant. We can be like an extension of their store and get commission or something."

"That was the plan," agreed Blaise.

"There they are now, they're just leaving. Shall we?" Harry asked. Blaise nodded, and the duo headed off to meet Fred and George Weasley.

They made eye contact from across the hall and headed to a nearby classroom. Blaise cast a couple privacy wards when the door shut behind the four of them, causing a raised eyebrow from Fred or George Weasley— which one was anybody's guess. The other one added a couple wards on top of that and raised his eyebrow as well.

"So what were you wanting, young Harrikins? And Zabini," amended twin one hastily.

Blaise seemed a little disgruntled that they assumed Harry was in charge, although it was difficult to notice. Harry nodded his head in Blaise's direction, giving him the first shot.

"Harry and I were discussing something and we were considering giving the two of you an opportunity to get in on it. Now this is a

privilege people would kill for, so keep that in mind when you consider the offer."

Fred and George were already appearing interested. They were hanging on to Blaise's every word.

"We'll be starting up a shop of sorts, selling all types of banned products, pranking material, etc. We thought you guys would prefer to be the Gryffindor contacts. It's also a healthy bit of irony that the Gryffindors would be purchasing their items to more than likely use on the Slytherins from Slytherins in the first place. And the two of you are more than capable of taking a joke..." Blaise trailed off.

"So you want us to sell your products to Gryffindors?"

"They aren't exactly our products, per se, but yes. You'll get a commission off what you sell and a discount if you want to buy anything for yourselves. Plus, some harder to find items and ingredients might be able to make their way into your hands."

The twins looked at each other for a moment and turned back.

"What's the catch?"

"I knew they were good," Harry commented with a grin. They turned their attention to him.

"We'll let you join up in the group in exchange for you giving me the Marauder's Map, and I'll tell you what I know about it." The look on their faces was priceless. Their mouths opened and closed soundlessly and they were utterly gobsmacked.

"Map— how?—"

"When— do— what?"

"Potter!" they both yelled together. Harry continued grinning.

"Well?" he asked expectantly, holding his hands out. Fred and George looked at each other again and shared a silent conversation, presumably in twinspeak. Twin one pulled the map out and handed it to twin two, who handed it to Harry reverently.

"I solemnly swear that I'm up to no good," Harry intoned, and the map came to life. Fred and George's eyes widened.

"It took us two years to figure that out..." Fred trailed off. Harry knew it was Fred now because the map said so.

"Right, so Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs. This will give you boys a laugh. Padfoot is none other than the notorious mass murderer Sirius Black. Wormtail—," Harry cut off abruptly. This was perfect. He could have the Weasley twins get Wormtail. But he couldn't let them know, it would be too suspicious. "Actually, let me start again." Their eyes had widened dramatically at the mention of Sirius Black. "Do you know what Black was arrested for?"

"Killing thirteen people with a single curse, wasn't it Fred?"

"You know, the map says that you're talking to George, not Fred." The twins grinned sheepishly.

"Force of habit," replied Fred.

"But yes, that was what he was imprisoned for. No trial. Twelve Muggles and one wizard, the wizard being Peter Pettigrew, also known as Wormtail. The only thing they found on the scene of Wormtail was his finger." The twins gasped again. Blaise was also paying attention now.

"This next Marauder, I need you not to bring too much attention to unless it's in private. Moony is none other than Professor R. J. Lupin, our new Defense teacher."

"Seriously?" Fred asked, his previously somber mood forgotten.

"What an inspiration," cried George.

"And our O.W.L. year no less. What brilliant luck!"

"So what about Prongs?" asked George.

"My Dad was Prongs." The effect was instantaneous. Fred and George immediately dropped into bows, claiming they 'weren't worthy' and professing their undying respect for the son of a Marauder.

"The map is yours by birthright, young Harrikins. Use it well."

"Thank you gentlemen. Blaise, the mirror?" Blaise pulled the mirrors out and handed one to the twins.

"This will be our method of communication," explained Blaise. "I'll say your name into the mirror, Fred Weasley, and the mirror should get hot, as you can feel. Just tap the mirror and say my name and it will answer."

Fred looked at it curiously. "Blaise Zabini," he said. Blaise's expressionless face appeared in the mirror.

"I'll contact you on this for the goods we're selling, and if you have any requests or orders, you can do the same."

"Will do, young Zabini. It will be a pleasure doing business with you."

"Do you think you could bring me Scabbers at some point? I need to try something for a prank and need a test subject."

Harry had debated long and hard about telling the twins that Wormtail was actually Scabbers, but he just didn't want them to know. That was a need to know basis, and they didn't need to know. Also, they would more than likely just turn the rat in to Dumbledore, and Harry wasn't sure if he wanted to do that yet. He needed to feel out the situation with Black first. According to his memories, he would attempt to break in during Halloween, so Harry would have to wait until then.

"Yeah sure, Harry," Fred said with a laugh. "We'll just nick him from Ron at some point. Any hurry?"

"Take your time," Harry said after a moment. "The prank is going to be the day after Halloween. Let them fall into a sense of security, then nail them the next day."

"Brilliant," George said.

Fred dabbed at an imaginary tear in his eye. "You truly are a Marauder's son, young Harry." He ruffled Harry's hair, which Harry

promptly scowled at, and the twins left after bowing dramatically to the two Slytherins.

"That went about as good as could be expected," Harry commented.

"Yeah, well, I'm more nervous about the Care of Magical Creatures class we have in a few minutes," deadpanned Blaise.

Harry shuddered. If he remembered correctly this was the class with the Hippogriffs. But would Malfoy be a complete idiot again?

Harry and Blaise caught up with Lily and Daphne and the four of them made the trek to Hagrid's hut for their first Care of Magical Creatures class.

Feeling somewhat sympathetic towards Hagrid, Harry spread the word around on how to open the books (stroking the spine) to take off a little pressure off his first ever class.

He told Hermione as well, and she spread the word among the Gryffindors.

Hagrid appeared a few moments later, and Harry chanced a look at Malfoy, who was between Crabbe and Goyle. He seemed to really have something against Hagrid, if the look in his eye was any indication.

"C'mon now, get a move on!" Hagrid called from his position near the trees. "Got a real treat for yeh today! Great lesson comin' up! Everyone here? Right, follow me!"

About five minutes later they approached a familiar looking paddock, which was currently empty.

"Everyone gather 'round the fence here!" Hagrid yelled. "There yeh go, make sure yeh can see— go ahead and open up yer books—"

"How?" drawled Malfoy.

"Eh?" Hagrid asked intelligently.

"How do we open our books?" Malfoy repeated.

"Isn't it obvious? You stroke the spine, Malfoy," Harry said airily.

The Gryffindors snickered, and a couple of Slytherins had to hold back a chuckle as well. Malfoy glared at the class and noticed the rest of them did indeed have their books opened. Including Crabbe and Goyle, which Malfoy was none too pleased about. Harry shot a quick look at Daphne and Lily, both of whom were grinning. He jerked his head towards Crabbe and Goyle and received a wider grin in response.

Hagrid beamed at Harry. "Righ' then. Malfoy, if yer ready?" Hagrid asked. Harry thought that was a bit rude of him in all honesty, but then Malfoy hadn't treated him with respect either. Granted, as a Professor, he should know better, but Harry wasn't going to voice that opinion. It was still slightly funny anyway though, since Malfoy turned red instead of angry.

"Well, let me go get the Magical Creatures," Hagrid said eagerly. Harry envisioned him hunched over, rubbing his hands together, and cackling. It was a frightening image and he quickly rid himself of it.

"Ooooh!" squealed a brown-haired Gryffindor, pointing towards the opposite end of the paddock.

A dozen hippogriffs trotted toward them proudly, none more so than Buckbeak, whose chest was puffed out and he seemed to strut more than stride. Had Snape been present he would have said that was the reincarnation of James Potter. Especially since Buckbeak cast a condescending glare on the Slytherins for no apparent reason.

"Get up, there!" Hagrid yelled, shaking the chains in his hand, urging the hippogriffs closer to the fence. Hagrid tethered them and then approached the class.

"Hippogriffs," he said proudly. "Aren't they beau'iful?" he asked.

Harry agreed. Although they were a very proud race, there was something very attractive about them. They weren't quite arrogant, more confident and sure of themselves. Their aura screamed respect, and it was almost unconsciously given. Once you respected them, they did seem to come across as beautiful.

"It's safe ter come a bit nearer," Hagrid said with a chuckle. Everyone seemed fine where they were though. Hagrid didn't notice.

"Now, the firs' thing yeh gotta know abou' hippogriffs is, they're proud."

"Like Malfoy," whispered Harry to Blaise, but loud enough for the blond to stop his conversation and hear what Harry had said.

"What's that, Potter?" Malfoy sneered.

"Just saying how much you and the hippogriffs have in common," Harry muttered back.

Malfoy's eyes narrowed. "I have nothing in common with filth like that," he spat.

"You'd be surprised," Harry shot back.

"Take that back," hissed Malfoy. He covertly drew his wand.

"Who wants ter go first?" Harry heard Hagrid ask in the background. Harry took a menacing step towards Malfoy.

"Brilliant, Harry, come on up then," Hagrid said in relief. Harry looked around behind him. Blaise, Daphne, and Lily had all stepped back and they smirked at Harry. Harry sighed, and decided it wouldn't hurt anything to interact with Buckbeak again.

He hopped over the fence and headed towards the hippogriff.

"Let's see how yeh get on with Buckbeak." Hagrid pulled Buckbeak away from the rest of the hippogriffs and slipped off the collar. Harry found himself facing the hippogriff.

"Easy, now, Harry," Hagrid said quietly. "Yeh've got to keep eye contact, now try not ter blink... Hippogriffs don't trust yeh if yeh blink too much..."

Naturally, once Hagrid told him not to blink, Harry had the urge to blink. Similar to when someone tells you to not look down, you invariably have the desire to look down.

Buckbeak stared at Harry with one fierce orange eye.

"Now bow, Harry." For some reason, Harry was feeling a lot more nervous this time than he had last time with the hippogriff.

Harry gave a curt bow and kept a wary eye on the hippogriff. Something didn't feel right...

Buckbeak stared at Harry haughtily. He didn't bow back.

"Ah, right, back away Harry, slowly now. Easy does it." Harry refused to back down. He didn't like the idea of leaving Buckbeak without being shown proper respect from the hippogriff.

The staring contest ensued, and Harry, oblivious to it all, waited for Buckbeak to recognize his superior—

Suddenly, Harry was on the ground with Buckbeak on top of him, the hippogriff screeching furiously and waving its wings menacingly. Harry stared in surprise at Buckbeak which quickly turned to rage. Harry checked his arms: he hadn't been hurt at all. Buckbeak had merely been proving a point. Harry stood back up, waving Hagrid back, and looked Buckbeak straight in the eye. The hippogriff eyed him again, and then turned away. Harry didn't know if it was because Buckbeak couldn't look Harry in the eye, or if he merely refused to do so.

"Look at me," Harry said softly, but the demand for respect was quite audible. Buckbeak turned his head and looked at Harry, before bowing slowly.

"I think yeh can touch him, Harry," Hagrid said hesitantly.

Harry thought on this, and decided it couldn't hurt. Well, it could, but it more than likely wouldn't. The class waited with a collectively held breath as Harry gently laid his hand on the hippogriff's beak, patting it gently. Buckbeak closed his eyes and leaned into the touch. Harry let out the breath he had been holding as well. At least that was over with.

The class broke into scattered applause, a few of the Slytherins happy he wasn't dead, while the Gryffindors, mainly Weasley,

hoping he had been injured more thoroughly. Harry heard his whispered jeering.

"I reckon he'll let yeh ride 'im, Harry." Harry had forgotten about that. Before Harry could voice his opinion one way or the other, Hagrid was already helping him up warning him not to pull any feathers. Harry wanted to remain firmly on the ground, but Hagrid's pleading look made it difficult for him to say that. Hagrid was obviously making the effort to like Harry now, even if he was a Slytherin, and Harry would try and do the same.

Going against the self-preservation instinct deeply ingrained in most Slytherins, Harry reluctantly got on Buckbeak and quickly grabbed a firm hold.

"Go on, then!" roared Hagrid, slapping Buckbeak.

The two twelve-foot wings flapped open abruptly and then they were soaring upward. It had been awhile since Harry had been in the air, but he would still always prefer his broomstick. With the broomstick, Harry was in control, and the ride was a lot smoother. Here, he rocked back and forth as the powerful wings flapped on either side and he really didn't have a good place to grip himself on. Instead his legs clung to either side of the hippogriff and he kept his arms wrapped around Buckbeak's neck as tight as he dared.

They flew once around the paddock before Buckbeak came to a rough landing. Rough in Harry's case anyway, as it was all he could do not to fall off.

"Good work, Harry!" bellowed Hagrid. Malfoy even clapped for Harry, albeit grudgingly. "Thanks, Harry," Hagrid whispered. Harry nodded, as he walked back to Blaise.

"Who else wants a go?" Hagrid asked.

The class hopped over the paddock cautiously and the hippogriffs were spread out among the students who got in groups. Daphne, Lily, and Blaise were all in front of a hippogriff with an inky black chest. Harry glanced around warily, checking to see who Buckbeak was with.

Malfoy was again in front of Buckbeak and eyeing him warily. Buckbeak had reluctantly bowed to the blond and was allowing himself to be petted.

"So Potter says we have something in common?" Malfoy asked quietly. "I still don't see how I could have something in common with a great ugly brute like you."

Harry couldn't believe Malfoy did it again. He ran to try and stop Buckbeak from attacking but he wasn't fast enough. Malfoy took a swipe to the arm and fell to the ground, bleeding and screaming in exaggerated pain.

Harry helped Malfoy up and quietly cast a spell to staunch the bleeding. "Episkey," Harry whispered.

"Hagrid, you should take him to the Hospital Wing," Harry said to the approaching Professor. Hagrid nodded. Hermione held open the gate for Hagrid and he hurried with Malfoy in his arms up to the castle.

The rest of the class followed more sedately. About half of the Slytherins were shouting angrily about Hagrid. Harry's group seemed to be fairly neutral about it, something they were gradually becoming known for. While Harry agreed Malfoy was very capable of being, first and foremost, an idiot, he wasn't going to voice that opinion. He was already seen as the antithesis to the typical Slytherin, and anything he said could further distance him from the rest of the house outside his group. Harry was trying hard not to antagonize Malfoy too much, one day he might need his help. So for those reasons Harry stayed quiet. One stray thought did manage to make its way into Harry's head though: maybe he would be playing Seeker after all...

Hagrid wasn't at dinner that night, but Flint was. Harry approached him cautiously.

"What does this mean if Malfoy isn't ready to play?" Harry asked.

"Well, you'll either play in his place or we'll get the game postponed. I haven't decided yet," Flint said distractedly. He was trying to catch Snape's eye.

Harry nodded once. Flint had told him he was off the team after he caught the Snitch too early last season, winning the match but losing the cup. Although in all fairness, if Flint could make a shot, they would have won, but that's how it goes sometimes.

Harry debated long and hard about checking up on Hagrid. He had never really gone there with anyone except Blaise and Hermione once or twice.

"You should," he heard Future-Harry think. Harry nodded to himself.

"Tracey," he said. She looked up from her book. "You mind going with Blaise and me to check on Hagrid?" Lily had already talked to her about what happened when he was talking to Flint. She smiled at Harry and nodded. He heard Blaise mutter to Daphne to set up the intervention when they got back.

When they knocked on the door, and heard a "c'min," a very obviously drunken Hagrid was awaiting them.

He looked like Harry with his glasses off as he tried to figure out who was at his door.

"Tha' yeh, Harry?" he asked thickly. Harry nodded, and then realized Hagrid probably wouldn't recognize that.

"Yeah, me and Blaise. And we brought our friend, Tracey," Harry said.

"Nice to meet yeh," Hagrid said gruffly. He absently petted Fang's head, who was currently sitting in his lap. Harry noticed the pewter tankard nearby that reeked of alcohol.

"Well, I guess that makes meh the firs' teacher to not even last passed their firs' class," Hagrid said morosely.

"Dumbledore really sacked you?" Blaise asked, somewhat surprised. Dumbledore's belief in second, third, and even fourth chances was fairly notorious.

"Not yet," Hagrid said as he took another drink. "It's on'y a matter of time after Malfoy..."

"He didn't seem too bad," Tracey commented. "I saw him in the common room and his arm was bandaged but he was using it just fine for awhile."

"At least until he tried to put his arm around me," Tracey muttered with a frown.

"He says he's in constant agony," Hagrid went on, apparently not hearing Tracey. "Moanin' an' groanin'... School gov'nors have been told, o' course. With Lucius Malfoy one o' them as well, I probably won' last much longer," Hagrid said sadly. "I just wanted a good firs' lesson... but they thought Hippogriffs were a bit too big ter start with. Shoulda' done flobberworms or summat else."

"You won't get sacked, Hagrid," Harry said confidently.

"Not after the first lesson. The Ministry and the Board have to show confidence in the school. They aren't going to fire you after that. You'll probably just get a lecture, they might try and do something to the hippogriff, and then that will be it," Blaise said.

"Not Buckbeak," Hagrid said, instantly sober.

"You should stop drinking, Hagrid," Tracey commented. Hagrid looked at her.

"Yeh yer right," he said. "Just a momen'," and he left to plunge his head in a tub of water.

Hagrid walked back in, shaking the water off his hair and beard. "Tha's better. Thanks for coming, I really—"

Hagrid stopped. He was staring at Harry as if he had never seen him before. "WHAT D'YEH THINK YER DOIN HARRY! ARE YEH MAD! YOU CAN'T GO WANDRIN' ROUND HOGWARTS! SIRIUS BLACK IS OUT!"

Harry sighed. "Honestly Hagrid, he hasn't gotten past the dementors yet."

"He already has once Harry. Come on, all three of yeh. I'm taking yeh back. Don' let me catch yeh comin' back down here after dark. I

ain't worth it." Hagrid grabbed Harry's arm a bit rougher than necessary and escorted them back to the castle.

"So much for making him feel better," Harry said dryly.

"Well it's not like we see him often," Blaise said. "We aren't exactly the best of friends."

"He's just emotional right now," offered Tracey.

"It's fine," Harry said dismissively. They entered the Slytherin common room and headed towards Daphne and Lily. Blaise and Harry sat on either side of Tracey while Daphne and Lily sat across from them.

"We need to talk, Tracey," Lily said seriously. Tracey stopped from pulling out her book and looked at her roommate.

"You need to stop immersing yourself in these books," continued Blaise. Tracey's head turned to Blaise, a faint blush appearing on her cheeks. She tried to have her brown hair hide it.

"We feel very unloved and unappreciated," added Daphne.

"And we care about you. We don't want you to fall into this pattern of destructiveness," chipped in Harry. Tracey's head kept turning to look at each one of them as they spoke.

"You need to open your eyes and don't let your third year fly by you," Lily said.

"We want you to enjoy it with us, not sit there reading constantly," Blaise said.

"And if you just keep on reading these books, Harry isn't going to ask you out," added Daphne mischievously.

Tracey turned very red now. She looked like she wanted to do just that and hide behind the book. Regardless, she did everything except look at Harry, which he would have found amusing if he had expected Daphne's comment.

Harry kept his cool though. "Exactly."

Tracey did look up at Harry now, and her brown hair no longer hid her face. There was a questioning look in her eyes, also calculating. Harry felt very vulnerable in that moment for some inexplicable reason.

"So you think I read too much?" Tracey said to clarify. Four vigorous nods met her question. "After one day?" Unabashedly, they nodded again.

"Was it that bad?" Tracey asked.

"We thought you and Granger had switched places," answered Daphne.

"Although not all of us might have minded that," Lily added slyly. No one rose to the bait.

"But really, you do need to enjoy everything, you're only here for so long," said Daphne again.

Tracey grinned at them. Harry and Blaise rolled their eyes. Tracey threw her book at them and the three girls headed to their room.

"Good night, boys," they called sweetly.

"Women," Harry and Blaise muttered in amusement.

They headed to their room and Harry got comfortable in his bed for the chat he needed to have with Future-Harry.

He was back in the Hogwarts of his mind, and he found himself seated comfortably at the tree by the lake. Future-Harry sat down cross-legged next to him.

"So explain to me the whole time-travel business. That was confusing as hell," Harry said.

"Yeah, it was. Time travel is very confusing in itself. But essentially, what happened was we needed the Gryffindor sword to have basilisk venom on it to destroy the horcruxes later. Now was as good a time as any. Also, you were pretty weak from blood loss, and you needed to make it out of there."

"So I saved myself basically."

"Yes. When you first got the time-turner, you left the portrait propped open after you turned it back. It stayed open for when you returned later to get the time-turner, an hour passed that point. Then you had enough time to go back, help yourself to the hospital wing, return the time-turner, and meet the evil Poppy Pomfrey," Future-Harry said with a laugh.

"I think it'd make more sense if I went back over the whole night fully, but I think I can pretty much understand now. I don't have a headache at least."

"Good. Because that's not what I wanted to talk about," Future-Harry said.

"Wormtail."

"Exactly. It's like we're the same person. I'm glad you're following me." Harry snorted.

"So what are we planning to do with him?"

"I don't know. Last time, he was the person who helped Voldemort gain a body. It would probably be in our interests for him to escape to Voldemort, but we still don't know everything that's going on right now."

"Like with Sirius."

"Exactly. He's different from last time. It might be because Riddle broke him out. We need to find Riddle or the diary— more than likely both, and get rid of them."

"One Voldemort running around is more than enough."

"I still can't believe Sirius imperiused us."

"You think it's cause I'm a Slytherin?" Harry asked genuinely.

"I don't know," Future-Harry said slowly. "He did have a thing against Slytherins. His whole family was in Slytherin and he was at odds with the lot of them."

"Do you think he was really going to take me to Riddle?"

"Well he threw a portkey at us."

"Yeah and then I ended up back at Privet Drive because I managed to overpower it with force of magic."

Future-Harry stared at Harry. "You can't overpower a portkey."

Chapter 21: The Intricacies of the Mind

Harry had a hard time sleeping that night. He had a lot on his mind, namely the loyalties of Sirius Black. What was his godfather playing at? If he really did just want to talk to him, there were many easier ways of accomplishing that. But then, maybe Azkaban unhinged Sirius more than he thought. Harry didn't think his sanity would remain intact if he was stuck in Azkaban for a couple months, let alone years. Harry wasn't even sure if his sanity would remain intact at all though, regardless of possible Azkaban imprisonment.

The other primary concern was Riddle. He had quite obviously escaped, but Harry had no idea where he was.

Not to mention Wormtail and all the Azkaban breakouts- or as Fudge called them, "releases." Why he decided to say that Sirius had actually manipulated events to free himself and was really a fugitive, Harry had no idea. He couldn't get inside Fudge's mind, and didn't know what this plot was. He needed more information. But a trip to the Ministry wasn't exactly possible at the moment. He would have to bide his time.

But right now, he needed to get up. Once he got ready, he headed to the Great Hall for breakfast and prepared for another day at Hogwarts.

After breakfast, the Slytherins headed down to Herbology with the Ravenclaws and it was fairly boring. Harry lost Slytherin a couple points for not paying attention, even though he wasn't the only one who couldn't keep their interest in the subject. Blaise had been snoring softly right next to him. But Sprout only picked up on Harry's inattention.

The class ended and the plants they had been attending looked properly trimmed, so they left towards their other class of the day, Defense Against the Dark Arts, with Professor Lupin.

The defense classroom they were in was fairly empty at the moment; Lupin obviously hadn't had the opportunity to set things up yet. This observation was proven correct, as the Professor walked in, carrying a portrait and hanging it on the wall, the picture of a werewolf staring back at them menacingly. Harry noticed other portraits were up, each showing a different type of dark creature.

Harry's eyes took in Lupin's ragged appearance and shabby robes, but then were caught by Lupin's tired eyes and Harry stared at him in surprise. He had been fairly out of it the last time he saw Lupin on the train, but now he was alert. A memory shifted its way into the forefront of Harry's mind.

"He appointed me your Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, after all. And I must tell you that I believe that we are facing magic many of us have never encountered or imagined," Lupin was saying with somewhat of a grimace on his face.

Harry watched himself begin to talk. "You want to leave Tonks at her parents' house and come away with us?"

"She'll be perfectly safe there, they'll look after her," Lupin said dismissively, but with a hard edge on his voice. "Harry, I'm sure James would have wanted me to stick with you."

"Well, I'm not. I'm pretty sure my father would have wanted to know why you aren't sticking with your own kid, actually."

Lupin's face drained of color. His words were drowned out as the memory blurred, Harry was struggling to remember kept moving and slowly came back into focus.

"Remus!" whispered Hermione. "Don't say that- how could any child be ashamed of you?"

"Oh, I don't know, Hermione, I'd be pretty ashamed of him," Harry said. Harry was on his feet, toe to toe with Lupin, who looked like Harry had physically hit him.

Blaise nudged him, while Harry and Lupin were silently staring at each other. Harry's memory blurred again as Harry struggled to reconcile the two worlds. Harry struggled to make out the words as he and Lupin continued to fight in the memory playing in his mind.

"I'd never have believed this. The man who taught me to fight dementors- a coward," Harry heard himself say quite clearly, while watching himself glare at a livid Lupin. Lupin's wand was drawn quickly and Harry heard a loud bang and felt himself flying backward as if punched, before slamming into the wall and sliding to the floor.

"Harry!" Blaise yelled. Harry looked up, and to his surprise he was exactly where his memory self was, against the wall and on the floor, as if the spell he watched being cast had hit him. He felt a sharp pain in his lower back. Lupin was staring at him in a mixture of confusion, shock, and concern.

Harry stood up wincing at the pain in his back, and looked at his Defense teacher in a new light. He would abandon his own kid...

Lupin made to help Harry up but Harry stood on his own, refusing to meet Lupin's eyes.

"Harry..." Lupin said softly, feeling completely out of his depth.

"What, Remus?" Harry snapped back. But then his brain caught up with him and he realized his slip.

"Err- Professor," Harry said, with only a lingering amount of hostility in his voice.

Lupin gave him an unreadable expression, before looking up and blinking at the rest of the Slytherins who had walked in. He shook his head as if to clear it, and the hand that had been making its way to seemingly rest on Harry's shoulder retracted.

"Well, now that you're all here," Lupin began uncertainly. Whatever had happened seemed to have shaken him.

"Wands out and follow me. We'll be dealing with a creature I managed to procure."

The class followed along with mild interest, only Malfoy commented about the utter disarray of Lupin's appearance and lack of proper classroom decorum. The rest of the Slytherins were mildly curious as to what their Professor would be confronting them with.

He led them into the teacher's workroom, which was currently unoccupied and gestured for them to wait at one end of the room. A wardrobe stood opposite them, shaking menacingly.

"Can anyone tell me what's in that wardrobe?"

"A boggart," Tracey said. Reading for Ancient Runes and Arithmancy all the time still didn't seem to take away from her knowledge on other subjects.

"Correct. Five points to Slytherin. Can anyone tell me what a boggart looks like?"

"Well no one knows for sure, do they?" drawled Malfoy.

"Also correct, Mr. Malfoy, and would you care to explain why?"

"Don't you know? You are the Professor after all." Malfoy said somewhat rudely. Lupin made no reaction to the comment. "I'm surprised, I imagine the Gryffindors would be able to answer that correctly right away," Lupin said mildly.

"If by the Gryffindors you mean know-it-all Granger," commented Nott idly. Most of the Slytherins laughed.

"Regardless," Lupin said, realizing he was losing control of his first lesson, as well as his patience, "does anyone know what a boggart does?"

Daphne sighed and chose to take pity on him. "It shifts into our deepest fear," Daphne said, "so when it doesn't see anyone, we don't know what it truly looks like."

"Excellent. Five points, Miss Greengrass. This gives us a significant advantage over this boggart. Can anyone tell me why? Mr. Zabini?"

"There are a lot of us," Blaise said carelessly.

"Correct, it will have trouble deciding what form to take with so many people to choose from. Now, the one thing that defeats a boggart is laughter. Try and imagine your fear turning into something comical, and the boggart loses its power over you. It also requires an incantation, Riddikulus. Together now," Lupin said, and the class dutifully replied, "Riddikulus."

"This class is rididikulus," muttered Malfoy, prompting a laugh from Crabbe and Goyle.

"What do you think Malfoy's fear would be?" Blaise asked curiously.

"Me or his father," Harry said half-seriously.

"You know, you might be onto something there," commented Blaise.

"Alright then, everyone get in a line and you can face the boggart one at a time. Remember, focus strongly on the image you want your fear to become to defeat it, then cast the spell. Miss Moon, if you would be so kind?"

Lily stepped forward and the rest of the class fell into line behind her. Harry was left wondering what his worst fear actually was. Because of that, he ended up last.

Lupin opened the wardrobe and released the boggart, which upon confronting Lily turned into a large snake, eerily similar to the basilisk from last year.

She cast the spell and the snake turned into a stuffed animal of a snake.

"Nicely done," called Lupin. "And we're off! Next!"

Blaise stepped forward and the boggart shifted into a beautiful woman, and immediately everyone was transfixed by her singing. The wings on her back made it seem as if she had descended from the heavens. Harry fought to keep his concentration, realizing she was a siren, and tried to resist the urge to follow the compulsion laced into her music. Instead, he tried to think of everything he knew about sirens. They were similar to the sphinx, in that they knew both past and future, but the true danger lied in their song, promising false truths in reward for staying to listen and heeding their call, and instead your reward was generally death.

Blaise was the only one who could hear what she sang though, as her words were only meant for him.

Snapping out of his reverie, he yelled "Riddikulus!" The siren had lost her voice.

A pale Blaise backed up and walked to the corner of the room with Lily while Nott stepped forward confidently. The boggart changed

again into an inferi this time, and Nott calmly cast the spell, making the inferi decay in front of them.

Smirking, Nott walked off, leaving Daphne to deal with the corpse, which had turned into Astoria, pale and cold on the floor and not breathing. Shaking violently, Daphne choked out the spell, and Astoria gave a little flop, and her head lolled to the side. Daphne looked back at Harry and their eyes locked. She took another breath and cast it again, with more confidence, and Astoria began to snore. Daphne made a strangled sort of laugh and walked off to the side to compose herself as Tracey stepped forward.

Tracey was suddenly submerged underwater, and she wanted to scream. Harry watched her panicked eyes dart back and forth, before she managed to yell the spell through sheer force of will, having to tell herself she wasn't drowning. The water quickly vanished, and Tracey allowed herself to breathe again.

Malfoy shoved Crabbe and Goyle out of the way and walked up to where the boggart was last seen. The water that had vanished materialized behind Malfoy and tapped him on the shoulder. He spun around and was facing a wand. Malfoy visibly shook, and he tried to stare back haughtily at the boggart, which was shrouded in mist and its face was hidden from view. Malfoy cast the spell and the boggart turned into Harry, and boggart-Harry fell flat on his face, breaking his glasses. Harry glared, prompting Malfoy to laugh even harder.

Pansy went next and Malfoy's laughter died in his throat, as her boggart was like Daphne's, only Malfoy was the one lying on the floor. He grew red and shoved past a tearful Pansy, who managed to make the same effect Daphne did by making Malfoy snore, which was an even funnier image.

Crabbe and Goyle both had the same boggarts, levitated food that they tried to grab at but stayed just out of their reach. Grunting, they both managed the spell and the boggart was defeated both times.

Millicent was next and a dead dog appeared where the food had been. She cast the spell and the dog rolled over, as if playing dead, and licked her face.

The boggart fell lastly to Harry, who stared it down, wondering what it would be.

He idly wondered if Occlumency could prevent a boggart from discovering what the person was afraid of, or if a different type of magic was at work identifying the victim's worst fear.

Boggart-Harry made a reappearance, and Harry found himself staring at an old reflection from his first year, Voldemort's deepest desire, turning Harry into a Dark Lord. The Harry with blood red eyes and a humorless smile walked slowly and purposefully towards his counterpart. Harry's worst fear was losing himself.

By unanimous consent, the Slytherins non-verbally decided not to mention any of their fears, although Harry would admit to feeling slightly curious about the message the siren told Blaise.

They fell into a silent routine, mechanically going through the motions of a normal day.

That's how the next couple of days went, everything merely routine and Harry in a trance, trying to deal with all the different problems beginning to swamp him, as well as thinking about the boggart, like the rest of his friends were silently contemplating. Future-Harry had summed up Harry's overall dilemma nicely:

"Every time you try again, you find new ways to make the same mistakes."

Potions on Thursday brought everything crashing down on Harry. Malfoy again made his dramatic appearance, swaggering in halfway through double Potions with his arm in a sling and a grimace etched on his face. To Harry though, it was different this time around because he actually knew Malfoy was faking it, since the git had been in Defense. This was merely to antagonize the Gryffindors, which, Harry had to admit, worked.

Pansy cooed something to Malfoy that Harry really didn't care enough to listen to.

"Settle down, settle down," Snape said idly, although his eye was scrutinizing Harry. Harry, on the other hand, wanted to laugh at the

looks of outrage from the Gryffindors, who were undoubtedly imagining the treatment they would receive from similar actions.

Malfoy seated himself next to Weasley and Thomas, who were attempting to make the Shrinking Solution that Snape had assigned.

Malfoy smirked across the room at Harry, who half-heartedly returned it before turning to Blaise.

"That should be interesting," Blaise commented.

Once Malfoy's cauldron was set up, his smirk grew even more.

"Sir, I'll need help chopping these daisy roots, with my arm—" Malfoy began, trailing off.

"Weasley, chop Malfoy's roots for him," Snape said without even looking up.

Blaise and Harry bit back a snigger. Weasley turned red but grudgingly did as he was told. Harry looked up from the rat spleen he had put in, and saw Weasley begin to mutilate Malfoy's roots. Malfoy apparently had drawn a similar conclusion.

"Professor," he drawled. "Weasley is mutilating my roots."

Snape swooped down on the table and exchanged words with them. The end result was a furious Weasley pushing his perfectly chopped roots to a grinning Malfoy, causing Harry to turn his laugh into a cough.

Blaise added the dash of leech juice and their potion turned the proper color of a bright acid green; Harry and Blaise had become pretty good at Potions between the two of them. Snape passed them and inspected their potion. His lips thinned and his expression darkened as he stared at Harry. Harry couldn't fathom why, he hadn't done anything wrong, as far as he knew. Harry missed a stir and the fumes started to come towards his nostrils. Harry quickly developed a headache and Blaise poured a little bit more of the leech juice to counter the missed stir, and the fumes quickly vanished. Snape abruptly turned away and stalked off, leaving Harry alone to continue stirring. Their potion was correct once more.

Longbottom wasn't as lucky. His potion was not a bright acid green. Not only was it not bright, but it wasn't even green.

"Orange, Longbottom? Orange?" Snape sneered incredulously. "Does anything penetrate that thick skull of yours? What must I do to make you understand, Longbottom? Is it so hard to follow written directions? They're on the board!" he snapped, picking up Longbottom's ladle and slamming it on the desk.

Longbottom looked to be on the verge of tears, and if they did begin to fall, any respect Harry had for him would vanish. Hermione interrupted.

"Please," she began hesitantly, but gaining confidence with each word. "Please sir, I could help Neville set it right."

"I don't remember asking you to show off, Miss Granger," Snape answered coldly. Both students were now very pink and embarrassed. "Longbottom, we will be feeding your toad some of what you call a Shrinking Solution at the end of class. Maybe that will encourage you to brew Potions properly."

Snape moved away and Longbottom looked like he was beginning to have trouble breathing.

"Help me," Longbottom moaned to Hermione. Blaise and Harry snickered.

Finnigan started to tell Weasley about a Black sighting, and both Harry and Blaise looked up. Malfoy's attention was captured as well, and the Slytherins began to discuss it.

"Thinking of trying to catch Black single-handed, Potter?" Malfoy asked, his eyes shining malevolently. Snape appeared to have his interest piqued as well, although Harry didn't notice.

"Thinking about it," Harry said off-handedly. "I already ran into him once."

That caught Malfoy off guard. Snape raised an eyebrow. Harry continued to press his advantage. "Of course, he's really not that powerful, I could easily take him at any time. But I'd rather let him come to me. It will be so much sweeter, since the prey is walking to

its' own death." Harry eyes flashed darkly, and Malfoy seemed almost terrified of Harry in that moment. He couldn't think of any reply, but Snape saved him.

"You should have finished adding your ingredients by now if you have any modicum of intelligence. And if not, your potion is as worthless as Longbottom's anyway so it's pointless to continue, you would only be wasting my ingredients. Leave the potions, they need to stew before it can be drunk, and once they simmer we'll test Longbottom's..."

Longbottom began to stir his potion feverishly while Hermione continued hissing to him out of the corner of her mouth.

Harry and Blaise washed their hands and put up their supplies.

"Really shut Malfoy up, huh?" Harry asked.

"What was all that about Black?" Blaise asked. "You never told me."

"Later," Harry muttered. Weasley had perked up from their conversation and was staring suspiciously at them with narrowed eyes.

Snape strode over to Neville once the lesson was nearly over and called attention to the class.

"Gather 'round," Snape said, his black eyes glittering menacingly, "and watch what happens to Longbottom's toad. If by some previously unforeseen boost in skill Longbottom has managed to produce a proper Shrinking Solution, then the toad will revert to a tadpole. But, if Longbottom is consistent with his normally abysmal performances, which I don't doubt, then the toad is more likely than not to be poisoned."

Snape held Trevor the toad in one hand and used a spoon to get some of Longbottom's potion, looking as green as Longbottom's face, and trickled a few drops down the toad's throat while the class watched with baited breath.

With a pop, Trevor became a tadpole in Snape's hands. Snape looked extremely sour and pulled a vial of antidote out of his pocket,

which he poured on the toad, returning it to its' original form amid cheers from the Gryffindors.

But Harry could tell that Snape knew he couldn't let Gryffindor have the last laugh. So he wiped the smiles off their faces.

"Five points from Gryffindor, Miss Granger. I told you not to help him. Class dismissed."

Harry and Blaise left with everyone else and Blaise dragged Harry into a nearby classroom, closing the door and turning around expectantly.

"Well, I ran into him back at my Aunt's place," Harry explained. Blaise waited patiently for Harry to elaborate.

"He took me somewhere, we talked, and then he threw a portkey at me and sent me back."

"What'd you talk about?"

"Well I accused him of working for Voldemort once he found out I'm a Slytherin. He didn't like that very much," Harry said thoughtfully.

"So he didn't want to kill you?" Blaise pressed.

"I - it didn't seem like it," Harry conceded. "I couldn't figure out what he was thinking."

"Strange," Blaise muttered.

"I wouldn't worry yourself over it; I'll figure him out when he comes to me."

"What makes you so sure of that?" Blaise asked curiously.

"He will, don't worry," Harry said solemnly.

Potions for some strange reason was quickly becoming one of Harry's best classes. He had no idea why, but he was beginning to excel at it. Snape could not find errors in his potion, although it wasn't for lack of trying, but Harry was finally putting to use the knowledge he gained from the book on potions reactions. Of course,

Snape was still acting strangely around Harry, for reasons unknown, but Harry just kept his head down and ignored it.

And although Snape would only grudgingly admit it to a mirror after ensuring that there were several privacy wards around him and no one could hear what was being said, Harry was also beginning to take after his mother in both potions and charms. Sadly, Harry's Defense grades were suffering, but Harry blamed that on the Professor.

He struggled to concentrate whenever he and Lupin were in the same room together. So as the class tackled red caps, kappas, and other various creatures, Harry's success rate in dealing with them was mediocre at best. Lupin had pulled him aside several times to talk with him about what was going wrong, but neither teacher nor student could find the words to start the conversation, and everything was continually awkward.

What was frustrating was Harry still had absolutely no explanation as to what happened that first day in Defense class and Lupin wasn't enlightening him on the subject. Harry briefly entertained the idea that Lupin had managed to view the memory as well, but quickly discarded it. The man didn't seem like the mind reading type.

Another odd thing Harry had noticed was that Dumbledore was watching him closer than normal, and Harry had no idea why. There were too many questions and not enough answers, and Harry was going insane.

That didn't even include the issue with girls. Lily and Tracey were both beginning to act differently around him, and Daphne would just give him an infuriating, all-knowing smirk. Harry wanted to smack her. Although she did give Blaise the same smirk whenever Hermione was around them, but whether or not Blaise noticed was another question entirely.

October brought with it the first Hogsmeade visit, as Halloween came upon them, and Harry was extremely thankful he had coerced Vernon into signing it back in the summer. It made getting there so much easier. So with Harry's permission slip turned in, he was able to go with his friends to Hogsmeade.

He ended up going somewhat together with Tracey; at least to the extent that they both visited a couple shops alone together, and stood by the Shrieking Shack. Well, it had seemed innocuous enough before that point. They had been enjoying themselves fairly well, and Harry had made a joke about the Shrieking Shack, the exact wording which was not quite easily recalled. But he did recall that Tracey's face was very close to his, and he remembered brushing a wayward strand of hair away from her eyes, and he remembered the pressure of her lips against his...

Harry had to admit, it was really nice having a girlfriend. Everyone thought it was cute every time they saw Harry and Tracey holding hands and just whispering nonsense to each other. It definitely kept Tracey from constantly reading at any rate. Lily had been slightly put out at first but she managed to get over it fairly quickly. She was a Slytherin after all.

The main surprise though was that nothing bad had happened that Halloween. From Future-Harry's memories that they had access to, Sirius had tried to infiltrate Gryffindor Tower. But that hadn't happened at all. All had been quiet on the Western front.

So Halloween was free of bad experiences for the first time, and Harry managed to actually somewhat enjoy it. But one other event happened fairly soon after that captured Harry's attention.

It was the first Quidditch match of the season, which finally gave Harry something to smile about. Malfoy decided not to claim injury and push back the match date because Flint told him he'd rather have Harry then. Flint was out for blood after an altercation between him and the three Gryffindor Chasers, although the details of the event were kept under wraps and no one was talking.

But when did that stop Harry?

He talked to the twins on the mirror, borrowing it from Blaise, and was able to get the full story.

Apparently, Flint had brought some firewhiskey from Merlin knows where and proceeded to drink it excessively. He had then stumbled out of the Slytherin common room and found his way to the library, where the three Gryffindor girls had been up late studying and were heading back to their rooms. He got a bit physical with two of the

girls, Angelina and Alicia, so they hexed him thoroughly. Katie Bell had been behind them and Flint got back up and shoved his lips on hers. She was too tired from studying and hadn't been paying attention but she apparently knew some good hexes because Flint ended up with some uncomfortable boils in a place that makes it difficult to ride a broom, or sit for that matter.

Needless to say, the Gryffindors wanted Flint dead, and Flint wanted to take his revenge on them for embarrassing him. So Malfoy's attempts of subterfuge were put on hold because Flint wanted immediate payback. No one ever told him revenge is a dish best served cold. Or that it was his fault in the first place, but that was another argument.

So the Gryffindor-Slytherin match was on, and Malfoy was forced to play "injured."

Harry sat in the stands cheering for the game, but he couldn't decide if he wanted Malfoy to royally screw up his chances and give Harry his spot back, or if he wanted to try out for a different position. Of course, Tracey wanted the Chaser spot Flint would be vacating, but Harry was having trouble choosing what he wanted. So he decided to just let the game play its course.

Gryffindor were off to a strong start, Wood had trained his team well. Harry would give him that. Flint couldn't get a shot passed him, and the girls had already combined for seventy points in the first two minutes. It was already looking like a rout. Bletchley just couldn't keep up in front of his hoops and he was getting destroyed on every shot. The Weasley twins weren't even letting Bole or Derrick hit a bludger, and Montague and Warrington weren't much help as Chasers either. Although that was good news to both Pucey and Tracey, both of whom had already stated they were going to play Chaser next year.

The girls continued to rack up points and the Slytherin fans moaned. It was not a good day to be a Slytherin. They were playing like the Chudley Cannons. Wood was on top of his game and had yet to allow a single shot. So the Slytherins began to do what they do best, play dirty. Alicia Spinnet was hit by a beater's bat and Bole was arguing that he thought she was a bludger. So Gryffindor got a penalty but Bletchley finally managed to make a save. Then an enraged Flint threw the quaffle right at a surprised Fred Weasley,

who was trying to hit a bludger at Montague, and he fell off his broom. George was there to keep anything bad from happening, but the damage was done. Flint began to be assaulted by bludgers and since Warrington was playing the worst game of his life, Montague was the only one who was able to do anything with the quaffle, but any shot on goal was stopped by Wood, although his post managed to save him a number of times as well.

During a brief break in the action Angelina Johnson suddenly found herself slammed into on either side by Montague and Warrington, and she had to flip over to remain on the broom. Hooch missed the foul though and three fourths of the stadium roared in outrage.

Derrick finally managed to get a bludger and so did Bole, and they both nailed Wood when he was directing Katie. He dropped about twenty feet before he managed to right himself, and Gryffindor received another penalty. It was 160-0 in favor of Gryffindor now and even the snitch couldn't save them now.

Malfoy still hadn't caught sight of the snitch yet, but Harry was staring straight at it. He thought about calling his attention to it, but the point quickly became moot as Gryffindor's Seeker, Kenneth Towler, began flying straight towards the snitch, to possibly end the game in a shutout. But luck was on Slytherin's side to some extent because Flint dropped the quaffle trying to avoid a bludger and it hit Towler right on the head. Katie Bell caught it and scored another goal for Gryffindor but Towler had lost the snitch and was dazed. Malfoy managed to spot it as it flew towards him and he grabbed it, ending the game in Gryffindor's favor, 170-150. It was for the best though, because Slytherin really had to cut their losses at that point.

It looked like Malfoy would be able to keep the job for the next game at least, even though Flint was furious with everyone there. Harry headed back down to the dungeons with the dejected Slytherin fans and they all were complaining about the terrible match.

He wasn't complaining too much though; Tracey was grinning and holding his hand, because the people whose position she wanted had played terribly, so that gave her a chance to make the team next year. Harry gave her a quick congratulatory kiss which made her grin even more. As Slytherin house entered their common room, though, everyone let out noises of outrage.

Apparently someone had managed to infiltrate their common room and it was now colored red and gold, the words Congratulations Gryffindor adorning a banner that was displayed prominently near the staircase. Their clothes also began changing colors, alternating between pink and yellow. Harry let another grin grace his face, as did Blaise. Someone had been putting to use some of their products.

They cancelled a couple of the spells, and with the help of the rest of the house, had the room cleaned up fairly quickly. Harry trudged up to his room and grabbed the Marauder's Map and looked at it thoughtfully. He wondered if he could spell the map to show him everyone's location, but make it be able to move backwards, almost like a recording. It would be similar to the magic of a time-turner, or even just rewinding a Muggle video tape, but Harry had no idea what spellwork would go into that. He filed it away as a long-term project.

Future-Harry thought that was a brilliant idea. They began discussing it.

"That would really make keeping track of people in the future so much easier."

"Yeah," agreed Harry, "I just need to figure out the spellwork behind the map. Maybe talk to Lupin."

"Maybe, but he's been acting strange with us," Future-Harry commented.

"We'll find out at some point, I'm sure. Hey, when are we going to try and get Voldemort to surrender the rest of your memories and knock him out of my head?"

Future-Harry shook his head. "We still aren't strong enough yet. I would wait until the summer before fifth year, or at least until we're back at school with everyone so if something bad happens they will be there to help."

"Why aren't we strong enough yet? We outnumber him, let's just take him out. The earlier we attack, the more of an advantage we'll have."

"True," Future-Harry said slowly. "But the risks are too high. If he manages to take out one of us..."

"Then the other one finishes him off. How am I supposed to get stronger anyway?"

"You'll mature magically and mentally. Also, the more memories he releases as we grow stronger, the stronger I become as well."

"I guess that makes sense," Harry admitted grudgingly.

"Of course it does. So moving on to another topic... how about you and Tracey?" Future-Harry asked, suggestively wagging his eyebrows.

"Shut up," Harry said, and abruptly stopped talking.

Harry flopped onto his bed and let out a contented sigh. He pulled his pillow close and found something under it. His hands warily pulled a note out from underneath his pillow and he read it to himself.

"Harry,

We need to talk. Meet me by the Whomping Willow tomorrow at midnight.

-S.O.B

Chapter 22: Smoke and Mirrors

Harry stared at the note in his hand again.

Harry,

We need to talk. Meet me by the Whomping Willow tomorrow at midnight.

-S.O.B.

Yeah, snorted Future-Harry, he has a lot of explaining to do.

"I feel bad for him," muttered Harry. "Initials like that... Although it's a bit ironic since his Mum named him that, so she's calling him a son of a bitch..."

Future-Harry burst out laughing.

Harry shrugged and stashed the note away before going to sleep, resolving to deal with the looming conversation the next evening.

Harry apparently had more than one serious conversation to carry out the next day though. On his way to breakfast Hermione pulled him aside for a chat. He sent Blaise ahead, who shrugged and turned a corner as he pulled out his mirror.

"Yes, Hermione?" Harry asked patiently.

"So I never got the story on how you and Tracy got together," she said, hand on one hip and her foot tapping impatiently as her eyes bored into his.

"Hogsmeade. We kind of, err, kissed," Harry said, squirming under her gaze and furious with himself for doing so.

"I didn't know things were so serious between the two of you before that," she continued.

"Well, I kind of liked her, and she had been flirting with me. I'm pretty comfortable with her too, so when she wanted to go to Hogsmeade, we went. And well the day was pretty fun and well, the moment came and it happened."

"It just seems too fast, I don't know if it will last."

"Hermione, it's third year. Just because you like someone in third year and date them doesn't necessarily mean you're going to marry them." Unfortunately, someone heard that besides Hermione and Harry didn't notice. Fortunately, it wasn't Tracey.

"He's got a point, Hermione," Lily said, walking up behind the two of them, causing Harry to jump and curse his lack of control this morning.

"That doesn't mean the relationship will be bad or anything," she continued, patting Hermione's shoulder. "Just don't read too much into it. I'm not," she added.

Hermione nodded with a smile. "I was just worried for you."

In a flash of understanding, Harry remembered Hermione hadn't really had any friends in the past, so any possibility of damaging a friendship must have been hard on her. And to imagine how long she had waited before asking him. In an even more impressive moment of brilliance, Harry reached over and gave Hermione a reassuring hug. To his surprise she broke into tears. He patted her back consolingly and looked past her towards Lily with a questioning gaze. She wasn't very helpful though, as she was struggling not to laugh. She did manage to give a confused shrug though before skipping off with a smirk.

Harry shook his head softly and after Hermione was better, walked into the Great Hall, leaving Hermione off at the Gryffindor table before sliding into a seat next to Tracey, who greeted him with a kiss on the cheek and squeezed his hand. The glare at Hermione went unnoticed.

Harry began to eat, while pondering his and Tracey's relationship. It really wasn't altogether that much different than before, except now they held hands and kissed some. Not really snogging yet, but at some point, he figured she wouldn't mind. And if she did, he could dump her. Just kidding. Besides, maybe he could get some experience in the dating department. His track record wasn't that great to begin with anyway.

The day went by relatively quickly, although he was cornered by Lupin a bit before curfew. Harry sighed; he had been avoiding the man for awhile, but it looked like that time had come to an end. He had no choice but to follow the weary looking Professor to his office for a chat.

"Harry," Lupin began softly.

"Professor?"

"At the beginning of term... do you know what happened? We never got to talk about it, and I've been sorting through... lots of things... before I could begin to talk to you about it."

"No idea, Professor." Lupin stared at him shrewdly. Harry idly wondered if Lupin was proficient in Legilimency.

"I must admit, I was severely surprised to discover you were sorted into Slytherin."

"Really?" Harry asked, surprised only by the rapid change in topic.

"Well, I was good friends with both of your parents, whom were Gryffindors."

"Well they didn't exactly raise me, Professor, so it would be difficult for me to take on their attributes if I can't remember them." It was a bit harsh, but Harry felt uncomfortable in the room with Lupin for some uncomfortable reason.

It all came back to that first moment in the Defense classroom when a memory involving Lupin sprang to Harry's mind, and the spell Lupin had fired at him in the memory had actually impacted Harry in the present.

Lupin's face did pale slightly more than it already was, but there was no other recognizable sign of a reaction.

"Of course, I didn't precisely mean it like that. I had just assumed-"

"It's natural, Professor, nobody expected Harry Potter of all people to be in Slytherin."

"I'm sure Severus's face must have been priceless."

Harry had to admit the man had a point. Snape's face was pretty damn hilarious.

"You could say that. He looked like he had found out he just drank one of Longbottom's potions."

Lupin's lip twitched. Harry didn't let the lack of laughter bother him.

"Well, if you'll excuse me Professor, I have some homework I don't want to be up all night working on."

Lupin let a small smile cross his features. "Of course. Good evening, Harry."

"Likewise," Harry said as he walked out, glad to get away.

Lupin remained seated in his office for quite some time, wondering whether or not Harry was lying to him, and what it could possibly mean if he wasn't, or even if he was...

Midnight couldn't come soon enough, and Harry had been waiting at the Whomping Willow for two hours. He had Blaise come with him to help keep an eye out, and they had done a surveillance of the area to make sure they didn't have anything to worry about. Blaise was under the invisibility cloak using a spell to mask his scent while Harry waited patiently by the side of a tree, out of sight from the castle but in plain view from the willow tree.

The grim that Harry was waiting for finally approached and turned into a surprisingly wandless Sirius Black. Hands held open, a relieved expression on his face, he approached Harry and sat opposite him, out of arms' reach.

"Black," Harry greeted coolly.

"Harry... we didn't get off to a great start last time."

"Well, you did Imperius me," commented Harry.

"I had to talk to you."

"You didn't do a very good job. The moment you discovered I was a Slytherin you were going to kill me. And I know you're in league with Voldemort."

"I didn't betray your parents, Harry, you have to belie-

"I'm not talking about then. I'm talking about now." There, Harry laid his cards out. How would Black react?

"I don't know what you're talking abo-

"He broke you out of Azkaban. You, Bellatrix, Rookwood, and Dolohov. I know."

"How...?"

"So answer me Black, or next time I see you I won't hesitate in trying to kill you."

"I- I had to get out. He offered me an escape. I took it. I don't plan on returning. I don't work for him. I- you have to know something about Voldemort- he isn't-" Black suddenly grabbed his chest in pain as it constricted tightly. Blaise whispered something in Harry's ear, causing him to straighten up and whip his wand out.

"You're under the effects of an oath. You just tried to break it. If you took an oath to him how am I supposed to even consider trusting you?"

"I just tried to break it didn't I?" he asked weakly.

Harry's hand never wavered. "You knew you wouldn't be able to. That could have just been an attempt to gain my trust."

"Fine, don't trust me. But I'm not working for him, and I'm not, nor will I ever, try to harm you."

"Even though I'm a slimy Slytherin?" Harry asked with a smirk. Black frowned and looked at Harry's Slytherin badge shining proudly on his robes.

"Marauder's honor," he said solemnly after a moment had passed.

"Bit of an oxymoron isn't that? You four weren't exactly the most honorable people to exist."

"We looked out for each other, and we would have done anything for each other," Black snapped hotly.

"Yes, Wormtail sure did lend credence to that saying." Black gained a twisted sort of smile.

"You know he's alive..."

"I know he's alive. But that's irrelevant."

"Right, because we have no idea where he is." Harry chose to let him think that.

"Quit talking like we're working together. There is no we. I haven't decided if I trust you yet."

"I'll teach you to become an animagus," Black said desperately. That caught Harry's attention. For the first time, his wand wavered.

Black pressed his advantage. "We can start during the Christmas holidays. Where will you be staying?"

"At a friend's, more than likely," Harry said.

"I can stay nearby over the holidays and teach you then."

"My friend's Dad and his wards would probably kill you."

"So you're considering it."

"I didn't say that. Quit putting words in my mouth you dumb dog."

Black chuckled. "What do you think of me right now?"

"I think you're a deranged lunatic. And you probably have fleas."

Blaise snorted. Black was staring open mouthed at Harry, Blaise's noise going unnoticed.

"I do not have fleas!" he said indignantly.

"So you admit you're a deranged lunatic then."

"I didn't say that either!" protested Black.

"Ah, now you know what it feels like."

"Slytherin," he grumbled.

"You say it like it's a bad thing," Harry said, barely restraining a grin. Although the mutt was exceedingly annoying, he was mildly entertaining. Future-Harry was making the words: I told you so, reverberate through his mind.

"You act like it's not."

"Whatever. I'm not having this childish argument with you."

"It's not childish. And you are a child anyway," Black pointed out.

"That's beside the point."

"What point? There should be no points being made. That's Moony's job. He always has the points. My points were that there were never any points to begin with. In fact, my points were-

"Pointless. Like the last few minutes of this conversation have been."

"Hey it takes a lot of effort to be able to make points like that."

"I'm sure," Harry said dryly. "Are you done wasting my time? You need to get everything together for animagus training."

Black's demeanor completely changed. If Harry was honest he also looked like he had just turned a few years younger as well.

"Really? You mean it? You'll let me? You trust me?"

"I'm giving you a chance to prove yourself. But you still have that damned oath, and for all I know it could be to deliver me to Voldemort or to kill me after my fourteenth birthday or something."

"I can't say much, but I think I can say that the oath doesn't involve me doing anything. It's only preventing information I learned from being told to anyone. Yeah, I can say that. And you have no idea how frustrating it is that I can't tell you. It's very important."

"Is it about something that is going to happen?" Harry asked sharply.

"I can neither confirm nor deny."

"Damn. Then don't worry about it. There's nothing you can do." Black ran a hand through his hair.

"Alright."

"Wait a second," Harry said. "I thought Voldemort was a spirit. What was he like when you encountered him. He already got a body?"

Black started panicking right in front of Harry and collapsed onto the floor.

"Shit, that must have been the oath," Harry muttered. Blaise pulled the invisibility cloak off and the two began to help Black as best they could. Blaise cast some spells around where they were to make it easier on Black's body. Black never noticed Blaise was there. Blaise replaced the cloak on and prepared to head back for help but Harry stopped him. He wanted to try something.

"Forget I asked, ignore that question. Don't attempt to answer it or give me any hints or find a way around the vow. It will only kill you."

Black suddenly stopped. An invisible hand patted Harry on the shoulder.

"Thank you," he whispered hoarsely.

"Err- right. Sorry about that, Black." Harry really wasn't sorry though, to be honest. It was good to have an idea of the contents of the vow. Only he had no idea how it could help.

"Call me- Sirius," he choked out. "I'm your Dogfather."

All Harry could do was groan.

Talking to Sirius brought up the problem of Wormtail again. Harry had completely forgotten about the rat. Future-Harry recommended he just capture him and turn him over to Dumbledore, but Harry was quick to point out that he wasn't supposed to have a clue about Wormtail. That would be problematic. What bothered Harry was the twins never came through on getting the rat for him, for his supposed Halloween prank. They either didn't trust him, or forgot, both of which were troubling.

Surprisingly, the twins confronted Harry about "Scabbers," the next morning.

"Look Harry, we know we didn't bring you Scabbers for the Halloween prank, but we just couldn't find him. Ron reckons he got eaten by Crookshanks, some crazy cat Hermione bought," apologized Fred.

"Even more reason for the two to hate each other it seems like," chipped in George.

"You know our word is good, we wouldn't let you down."

"Yeah, it's fine guys. Thanks anyway."

"What was your prank going to be anyway?"

"Can't tell. Might use it later," Harry said quickly.

"Wise decision. If you say what you're planning, people can pin it on you."

"He's a prankster yet, oh brother of mine."

"Right you are little brother."

"Only by a minute!"

"And how nice that minute was..."

"Oy! What's that supposed to mean?"

Harry left the twins to their mock argument and ran into Blaise.

"How goes the shop?"

"Pretty good, everything has been low key. Just a few purchases, feeling out contacts and new buyers."

"Good to hear."

"Of course, the Hogsmeade trip on the last weekend of term means not very many people will want to buy right now."

"Good point."

"Better than any of Black's," Blaise muttered with a snicker.

"My quill has a better point."

"Haha. Good one. Is that the one Lily gave you first year?"

"Yeah, it's actually a good one."

"Go figure. Well, I'll let you go sit with your girlfriend."

"Yeah, you can go sit over there and sulk in the corner."

"I do not sulk."

"Sure, just be jealous," Harry said and he patted Blaise's head consolingly.

He sat with Tracey and enjoyed the rest of the day.

Since Harry wasn't on the Quidditch team, December took a lot longer to arrive than he would have liked. Ravenclaw flattened Hufflepuff in their match, which really didn't affect Slytherin yet, because they needed a Gryffindor loss or else to dominate the other two teams as well, whichever worked. Not that Harry was keeping track.

A hazy rain had also seemed to permanently settle around the school, keeping the students inside and the few that ventured outside more often than not had to see Madam Pomfrey for a bit before they could return to full health.

When the rain finally cleared two weeks before the end of term, Hogwarts was alive with the Christmas spirit. Even outside, the grounds had become covered with frost instead of slick with mud. Flitwick had decorated the Charms classroom with fairies, giving the light in the room a shimmer, and an overall ethereal beauty.

The Hogsmeade trip was already upon them, and this time he and Tracey hung out with all their friends. The Three Broomsticks played host to them and they enjoyed a couple rounds of butterbeers and talked about Christmas shopping.

"You guys already know what you're going to get everyone?" Daphne asked.

"Coal," Blaise deadpanned.

"Hey!" Tracey was always the enthusiastic one when it came to presents.

"No anti-dark lights Blaise, or whatever the hell it was. Shop at a different store," Harry said with a grin. Blaise chuckled.

"I'm glad we didn't get that much homework," commented Lily.

"Speak for yourself, Professor Vector went crazy on assignments," moaned Tracey.

"Poor thing," said Harry, kissing her cheek. Blaise made gagging noises, making Lily chuckle. Tracey smacked him upside the head.

"Thank you, Harry," she said sweetly.

"You're welcome. But you shouldn't have taken such hard classes."

"She's not as bad off as Hermione though," commented Blaise. "I don't know how she's still moving."

"Sheer force of will."

"Speaking of which, there she is," said Daphne. And a very windswept Hermione Granger, with red cheeks from the cold and snow in her hair, walked into the Three Broomsticks. They beckoned her over. She waved, then after a moment walked over.

"Hey Hermione, how's Gryffindor been treating you?" Lily asked.

"About the same," she said breathlessly, pulling up a chair. Madam Rosmerta came by with a butterbeer for her a few moments later, having been signaled, and Hermione thanked her graciously.

"Out for some Christmas shopping?" Daphne asked.

"Yeah, I came with a few friends from Ravenclaw. They're at the bookstore right now."

Harry snorted. "No surprises there."

"You're welcome to shop with us for a bit if you'd like," offered Lily. Hermione glanced around the pub a bit for some reason.

"That's- that's alright. I think I'll be ok."

"You sure?" Tracey asked. "Because I have to ditch Harry to get him a present, so he and Blaise we're going to head off together. What do you say, just us girls?"

Hermione looked reluctant to accept the invitation.

"Harry, Blaise, why don't you two go ahead and get a head start on the shopping. We'll see you boys later."

Harry and Blaise looked at each other and shrugged. "Girls," mouthed Blaise. A bemused Harry nodded in agreement. The two of them stood up, bade farewell, and left to begin their Christmas shopping.

"Buy good presents!" yelled Lily after them.

"Ok Hermione, spill. What's wrong?" Daphne asked bluntly.

"Daphne, you have to be more polite than that," chided Lily. "What did those stupid Gryffindors say to you Hermione?"

"That's not much better Lily," pointed out Tracey. "Do you not like our company anymore?"

"Don't be silly, that's not it," snapped Lily. "We can all go hex them," she suggested brightly.

"Did they not like you having Slytherin friends?" Daphne asked.

"Yeah," Hermione said shortly.

"That's why you were with the Ravenclaws," Tracey said suddenly.

"And why we haven't really seen you this semester," added Lily.

"I'm sorry. It's not your fault, obviously. It's mine," she said quietly.

"Don't be ridiculous. Your house just has some gits in it, that's all. Each house does to be honest. We have Malfoy after all," Tracey said.

Hermione sniffed a bit. "Who told you that anyway?" Daphne asked.

"Most of the house," she whispered. "They cornered me the first day back."

"Cowards," Lily said angrily.

"They're stupid anyway. You're perfectly capable of choosing who you want to be friends with. Why don't you talk to the Weasley twins? They'll help you out I'm sure," Tracey said.

"They get along well enough with Blaise and Harry. It's worth a try," Daphne added.

"Thanks," Hermione said sincerely.

"So are you going shopping with us or what?" Lily asked.

Hermione grinned.

"So what are you getting?" Harry asked.

"No idea," Blaise answered. "You better get something romantic for Tracey though. Girls expect that stuff."

"Good point," Harry muttered.

"Let's get the easy ones first," Blaise said.

"Hey there's Dervish and Banges. You know, I could probably ask them for help making that guitar..." Harry trailed off.

"Ah well, bookstore first I suppose."

They headed to Scrivenshaft's and picked up one of the owl order catalogues for some books.

Harry found an interesting one on Ancient Runes that he thought might help out with Professor Ancomah, and ordered it for himself, which was rather "defeating the point," as Blaise pointed out, of Christmas shopping. He also managed to find one on ancient magical cultures for Hermione and one on divination and prophecy for Lily.

"Well, that's probably all I'll get out of here, you about ready, Blaise?" Harry asked, while paying for the order at the front. Blaise was moments behind him, paying for his own orders.

"Just about," he said. Harry nodded and then a quill caught his eye, so he bought it for Astoria. It was a beautiful deep blue, with hints of green throughout it and outlined in gold.

Leaving the shop, they headed to Honeyduke's for some candy to please their stomachs, before going to Zonko's. Harry bought a couple interesting products for the Weasley twins, which Blaise also did, having the same idea. Of course, Harry knew nothing would ever be able to top the thirty second time-turner he had gotten the two of them. He wondered how often they used it.

Harry kept Daphne's present simple, opting to get her a gift certificate to Gladrags. That left Tracey. They walked off of High street, near Madam Puddifoot's and a jewelry shop, Leander's was conveniently located nearby. Shrugging, they both entered the store and Harry managed to discover a beautiful bracelet he bought for Tracey. It was a series of red stones set in silver, so Harry went ahead and bought it.

He just needed something for Blaise really, so Dervish and Banges was their next stop. Harry bought Blaise a sneakoscope. Their

shopping done for the day, they returned to Honeyduke's to buy some more chocolate before heading back up to the castle.

On the way, they saw an augurey flying around. "Reaper, wasn't it?"

"I think so," muttered Blaise.

"I wonder how Hagrid is doing. We should drop in. The girls are still shopping anyway."

Blaise shrugged and the two of them headed to Hagrid's hut and knocked on the door.

"Hey Hagrid!" Harry called, banging on the door. There was no answer.

"You think he's out?"

"I dunno, put your ear to the door," Blaise said. Harry complied.

"There's a weird noise... Listen. Is that Fang?"

Some low, throbbing moans could be heard emanating from the hut.

"Maybe he's hurt?" Blaise suggested.

"Hagrid!" Harry yelled again, banging on the door. "Are you all right?"

There was a sound of heavy footsteps and the door creaked open moments later. Hagrid's face appeared in the doorway, his eyes red and swollen and tears falling down his face and landing on his vest.

"Yeh've heard?" he bellowed, and flung himself at Harry's neck.

Harry, with Blaise's help, managed to maneuver Hagrid back inside and into a chair. He began to sob uncontrollably.

"What's wrong, Hagrid?" Blaise asked tentatively.

Harry spotted an official looking letter lying open on the table. It also looked to be somewhat damp.

"Is that what's causing you problems?" Harry asked astutely, gesturing to the letter. Hagrid's sobbing redoubled, confirming Harry's suspicions, and the letter was shoved towards him. Harry and Blaise read it together.

Dear Mr. Hagrid,

Further to our inquiry into the attack by a hippogriff on a student in your class, it has been decided that you will not be held responsible for the regrettable incident, although any future decision making on your part during class that leads to another injury could lead you subject to a negligence charge. But for now, we have accepted Professor Dumbledore's assurances on the matter, and you will be allowed to continue your role of Professor.

"A bit harsh but it sounds like you'll be ok," said Blaise. Hagrid sobbed harder and waved one of his hands, motioning for them to continue reading.

We are required to hold the hippogriff accountable for its own actions, however, and attacking a student is not something a being of less than human intelligence is allowed to do. Therefore, we are upholding the official complaint of Mr. Lucius Malfoy and this matter will be taken care of by the Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures. The hearing will take place April 20th, and we ask you to present yourself and the hippogriff at the Committee's office in London on that date. In the meantime, the hippogriff should be tethered and isolated.

Yours in fellowship...

The governors' names were listed.

"Ah, rough luck there. The Committee, and most of the government actually, is in Malfoy's pocket," Blaise said.

Hagrid choked back another sob. The corner of Hagrid's hut called their attention as they heard a chomping sound, and they realized Buckbeak was there in the corner.

"I couldn' leave him outside in the cold by himself," Hagrid said quietly. "And on Christmas." Tears threatened to fall once more.

"Well, you'll just have to have a good defense, Hagrid. You can call me as a witness if you want," Harry said. Hagrid gave him a bone-crushing hug.

"I can't lose! If I do they'll- they'll-" Hagrid drew his finger swiftly across his throat and began sobbing all over again.

"Everything's goin' wrong now. I feel like I'm in Azkaban..." Hagrid whispered.

"Is it awful in Azkaban, Hagrid?" Harry asked.

"Yeh've no idea. Never bin anywhere like it. Yeh begin to think yer goin' mad. Keep goin' over yer worst memories. Can' really remember who yeh are after a while. Begin ter wonder if it's worth livin' anymore..."

Harry shuddered. He really didn't want to go to Azkaban.

"We'll see if we can find anything," Harry said, patting Hagrid's arm. Blaise nodded loyally beside him. Hagrid swept them both up in another hug.

"Thanks, you lot are great," Hagrid said sniffing.

"Take care, Hagrid," they said, walking out of the hut and back to school.

"That hippogriff doesn't stand a chance," Blaise muttered once they were almost near the doors.

"I think you're right."

You'd be surprised, Future-Harry said.

Harry almost slipped while he was walking. Really? Harry asked.

Anything's possible.

Term ended soon enough, and Harry and Blaise both left to Zabini manor for the holidays. Their presents were all mailed off accordingly, and they played some Quidditch outside after they had

unpacked. When they sat down for dinner, Mr. and Mrs. Zabini had a serious conversation with them.

"Now, boys, you're both going to be fourteen soon, Blaise, in a couple more months, Harry a few more after that. You will be expected to start attending some of the Pureblood holiday balls. As head of the household, Harry, you probably already should have been attending some, but your unique situation has allowed you to get by without going. Starting next year, you boys will have to learn proper etiquette at a Pureblood ball," Mrs. Zabini said.

"And Blaise, as the first male child, you'll be required to attend as the heir. Helen took the liberty of enrolling the two of you in classes for the summer," Mr. Zabini added. Blaise shot a glare at his Mum when she wasn't looking.

"Thanks, Mum," although Blaise sounded anything but.

"You're welcome, sweetheart," she returned with a smirk.

"You're a cruel woman," Blaise replied, smiling.

"Only to those I love," she answered.

"Sorry, Harry. Sounds like Mum loves you too," Blaise said, ducking a swat from his Mum.

"Thanks, Mrs. Zabini," Harry said diplomatically.

"Don't mention it," she said dismissively.

They finished the remainder of the dinner, discussing the term, before they headed off to bed. Hedwig had flown off, and she arrived bearing a note and a package.

Harry pulled it off and she nipped him affectionately. Apparently Mrs. Zabini and Hedwig shared in common the ideology that causing harm to your loved ones, whether physically or mentally, indicated your depths of feelings for them.

He opened the package first, which was a nondescript notebook, filled with marginally decipherable handwriting. It also came with a book detailing the basics of animagus theory. Harry knew that

because of its title: The Basics of Animagus Theory. The note was from Sirius.

"Get reading. Merry Christmas.

-S.O.B."

"Well that's a lovely note," Harry said, tossing it to Blaise.

Blaise suppressed a chuckle.

"Good luck with that," Blaise said.

"What, you don't want to be an animagus?" Harry asked curiously.

"Not particularly," Blaise said.

"Your loss," Harry said with a shrug.

Harry used the upcoming days before Christmas to practice Occlumency, but Future-Harry already had that taken care of. He had started to try and build defenses around Harry's mind, but for the most part, since Voldemort was occupying a corner of it, their defense would always be weak.

Harry ended up just talking basics about it, and maybe once Voldemort was out of there he could do the thing properly.

Thankfully, there were other things to do around the manor to occupy his time, like Quidditch, Wizard's Chess, and some good old-fashioned exploring. Of course, Harry also spent the time reading the book on the basics of animagus theory.

Harry was proud to say he understood hardly any of it. It first went into dry and boring detail about what an animagus was: a witch or wizard who possessed the ability to turn into an animal at will. It went on to describe how dangerous the process was, how it was regulated by the Ministry, how many people tried but few were successful, and generally just tried to dissuade the reader from attempting the process. The next few pages were devoted to pictures of people stuck in mid-transformations. The book was Ministry issued if he had to guess, since there were a lot of pages

and nothing was being said. Finally, tucked in the middle there were two sentences that gave some important details about the process.

"To succeed in becoming an animagus, you must first discover what animal you will turn into. To do this, you must register with the Ministry and pay a fee to purchase the book on the process, and you must have a permit to brew the necessary potion."

So all that told Harry was he had to brew some sort of potion to reveal his animagus form. It sounded simple enough. That was the first step. He threw the Ministry book aside and glanced through the notebook, which he realized were the Marauder's notes on the process.

-Potion Attempt 89-

Sirius feels like we've hit on the right combination of ingredients here, with this one. -P.P.

Feel free to look at the same comment back on Attempt 37 as well though. -J.P.

This one has achieved the right color that was described for the Animagus Revealer Potion. -S.B.

This has occurred nine times. -P.P.

Of the previous eight that had the right color, two had the wrong texture, three had the wrong consistency, one was close but was too diluted, one we never figured out what was wrong with it, and one caused the drinker to sprout flowers. That one has been noted for prank usage. -J.P.

Testing is now commencing. If it works properly, Peter should be unconscious for thirty minutes to an hour, and upon waking up, he should have discovered his animagus form. -S.B.

An hour has passed and Peter is still unconscious. Sirius thinks we might have poisoned him. I admit that it's possible. -J.P.

The potion was a success. My form is a rat. -P.P.

If it weren't for the fact that proved the potion worked, I'd say that's not something to be proud of Peter. –S.B.

Sirius is attempting it now. –P.P.

Forty-seven minutes later, and the grim is born. That looked so creepy when the grim came out of the fog... –S.B.

My turn. –J.P.

Forty-six minutes later (hah! I win.) and my form is a stag.. –J.P.

Like you are when you go to parties since Lily won't date you. –S.B.

Shut up. –J.P.

The ingredients for this potion and the instructions on how we brewed it are listed on the previous pages. Do not lose them! –S.B.

Harry glanced at the instructions and ingredients and did a double-take. It was over three pages of instructions. Talk about a difficult potion. Sirius could brew that. He'd already done it once. Harry didn't enjoy Potions that much.

Thankfully, Christmas found its way to Harry at a leisurely pace, giving him more time to have fun after hitting a roadblock on the animagus front.

When they woke up and opened presents Christmas morning, Harry had another fairly good haul. He received a broomstick repair kit from Hermione, some dragonhide boots from Lily, a book on politics from Daphne and Astoria, a knitted emerald sweater from Tracey, and a new watch from Blaise, which he thanked him for profusely (his old watch had been broken during Herbology by an unruly plant).

"Happy Christmas," they all chorused. Harry and Blaise ran outside to make snowmen and have a one on one snowball fight before lunch, and they enjoyed the day.

Harry read some from the Runes book and they both were somewhat studious over the rest of the holidays before it was time to return to Hogwarts.

Everyone said thank you to everyone else for the gifts when they got back, and the first day of classes outside with Care of Magical Creatures wasn't too bad since they spent it building a fire.

Ancient Runes had them each looking at a different rune, feeling it out, and trying to discern its' meaning. Harry's felt uncertain, unbalanced, and hot. No idea what that meant though. Professor Ancomah just patted him on the arm when he turned it in.

The Ravenclaw-Slytherin Quidditch match came up about a week after term started, and Slytherin managed another narrow margin of victory, although this time it was no thanks to Malfoy. He had completely missed the snitch twice when it had been right next to him and the Ravenclaw Seeker managed to snag it and get a close loss for her team instead of a thrashing. Flint offered Harry the job back if he wanted it for the Hufflepuff match. They would apparently need a Seeker who was capable of earning them the points when they needed it. They were in a tough spot now though; a Gryffindor win against the Ravensclaws would put them back into first place, and then Slytherin would need to win by a wide margin against Hufflepuff and hope Gryffindor was unable to do the same or else they would lose the cup.

Harry was up to the challenge. But Quidditch practices six nights a week were fairly grueling. So January turned into February and Harry was beginning to show the strain with all his homework and still spending time with Tracey.

He had also been making the habit of checking his Marauder's Map to try and find Wormtail, but nowhere that he poked, prodded and searched revealed the name of the traitor, so Harry was stuck.

Black- Sirius that is- had been trying to get the ingredients for the potion for the past month but was having difficulty with a few of the ingredients, none of which Harry had on hand. He was forced to wait.

Lupin had also begun to take an interest in Harry for some reason. He remembered his Defense Professor was a werewolf, so he began to have the paranoia that Lupin could smell the remnants of Sirius Black's overpowering stench from when they met in December. That was quickly thrown out in favor of the odd way Lupin had reacted to their conversation about the first day of class.

"He knows something," Future-Harry had said. "But about what?"

"You don't think he saw that memory do you?" Harry asked.

"I think," Future-Harry began slowly, "he might have been reliving it."

Chapter 23: Defying Logic

"What?" Harry said.

"I think Lupin might have been reliving that memory," Future-Harry repeated.

"Let me get this straight, you think that Lupin is from the future? Talk about pulling one out of your ass..."

"It's plausible," defended Future-Harry. "What else makes sense?"

"Maybe he used Legilimency on me and watched the memory replay in my mind," countered Harry.

"How'd you come up with that so quickly?" Future-Harry asked.

"He always looks at my eyes," Harry said with a shrug. "It sounded reasonable. Might also be why I reacted as if the spell hit me."

"Maybe," Future-Harry said doubtfully. "More likely you're infested by a Wrackspurt," Future-Harry said with a grin. The joke fell on deaf ears.

"If we went with your logic, then Sirius would probably have returned too, because it would seem like everyone who was around when Voldemort killed you would have traveled back. That would also include our parents, but they were already dead here anyway, so their return would have done nothing," Harry said logically.

"Well what if they didn't know I came back? They wouldn't know how to react to a Slytherin Harry Potter, and they certainly wouldn't expect their Harry to be a Slytherin."

"Well that leaves us at a bit of an impasse doesn't it? Because that sounds believable too," Harry replied with a sigh.

"Too bad we can't just confront either one of them," complained Future-Harry.

"That's it! Just casually mention something from the future in front of them and if they respond to it, they're from the future. If they have no

idea what we're talking about, then they aren't. You're a genius, for a Gryffindor anyway," Harry said cheekily.

"Hey, do we know anything about what's going to happen in the near future?" Harry asked rapidly, before Future-Harry could come up with a comeback.

"Some," came the response. "But it's mostly useless. Like me, Ron, and Hermione go after Sirius when he drags us into the Whomping Willow. Well, he drags Ron in there because he was trying to get at Wormtail. But we can't find Wormtail, and we don't talk to Ron, so neither of those events is likely to occur. Professor Trelawney makes a prophecy talking about Wormtail escaping to reunite with Voldemort. Also, Sirius isn't really looking for Wormtail. We are. We also know about the Tri-Wizard Tournament that's occurring in fourth year. But we don't know any details about it. We competed in the tournament though, I do remember that. And there's a prophecy about us and Voldemort. Something having to do with why he attacked us, and one of us is gonna kill the other one. That's really the gist of what we know at the moment, Voldemort has a tight lock on any pivotal future memories, although we have managed to get a few of his memories- mostly spells and such- nothing too life-changing."

"Lovely, for traveling back in time, we really don't have any tactical advantages do we? I say screw it, let's attack Voldemort now." Harry drew his wand to give further credence to his statement.

"No!" Future-Harry said adamantly. "Not yet. Wait until the end of fourth year."

"What's wrong with now? We wait until the end of fourth year, something really bad could happen. Then we'll be screwed, and we could have had the upper hand."

"And what if we lose?" Future-Harry countered. "Then what? Three Voldemorts are running around. Don't forget about the Riddle from the diary. We were never able to take care of him. We don't even have any idea where he is or what he's doing. And, he's freed Bellatrix, Rookwood, and Dolohov."

"Sometimes, you have to take risks. Otherwise, you don't get the reward."

"The risk is too high. The odds of us winning are between nil and zero right now. We wait. If you want to attack, go ahead, but I won't help you- which means you will lose for sure."

"Coward."

"Gryffindor," Future-Harry returned.

"Oh no you didn't," Harry said dangerously. Future-Harry merely smirked.

"Look, we wait until the end of fourth year and we can get Daphne to teach you some Legilimency. You'll have more control over your mind. In your mind, you can make up the rules. That's an extremely important tactical advantage. At the end of this year, we'll attack him for a few moments, just to try and free up some memories of fourth year. How's that for a compromise?"

"That sounds like a good idea. I'll get started on Legilimency."

"You need to learn Occlumency first. You haven't learned anything. All you did, and by you I mean me, is organize memories, which just makes it even easier for an attacker to peruse your thoughts than if your mind was chaotic."

"What about the Zabini's? You think they could teach me Legilimency and Occlumency. As paranoid as Blaise's Dad is, that seems like something he would know."

"We can look into it over the summer. Let's send a letter."

"Good call."

Harry returned back from his mental conversation and tried to remember what all was coming up. Unfortunately, he wasn't paying attention and walked right into Malfoy. Contrary to popular belief, Malfoy wasn't all that friendly to Harry just because they were fellow Slytherins, and with no one around to see them, Harry found himself staring at a spell flying straight at him.

The Jelly legs curse hit him dead on, but Harry ignored it.

"Petrificus Totalus!" he yelled, but Malfoy managed to dodge with a smirk.

"What's the matter, Potter? Your legs are shaking. Scared of me?"

Harry took the time to counter the curse on his legs and dropped to the floor, dodging Malfoy's rictumsempra.

"Expelliarmus!" Harry yelled, and to both his and Malfoy's surprise the spell connected, sending the pureblood tumbling and his wand sailed towards Harry-

Only to be plucked out of the air by Professor McGonagall.

"I'm ashamed of you, Mr. Potter. Dueling in the corridors? That will be a detention with Mr. Filch, and I'm afraid I can't allow you to go to Hogsmeade this weekend.

"But- Professor- Malfoy- he-" Harry sputtered.

"All I saw was an unprovoked attack on a student, Potter. That's my final say on the matter."

"You have got to be kidding, Professor."

"Do I look like I'm kidding, Potter?"

Harry groaned. "What did I do to you?" he muttered. Unfortunately, she heard him. "Twenty points from Slytherin, Mr. Potter." Harry walked away and stuck his wand straight in the air, holding it between his middle and ring fingers.

"Ten more points, Mr. Potter!" she called after his back, taking offense to being flipped off.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Blaise asked when Harry was back in the common room.

He asked because Harry had cast an incendio on two separate pillows, before repairing them both and flopping dramatically into a chair.

"Malfoy and McGonagall," Harry said bitterly. "I walk into the git and he starts cursing me. Then, I disarm him right when McGonagall turns the corner. I pull off a detention for attacking a student unprovoked, and can't go to Hogsmeade this weekend either. Tracey's gonna be pissed."

"Why am I going to be pissed?" Tracey asked. Harry groaned. "Today is not my day."

Harry explained his predicament to Tracey. She listened with a frown on her face and a dark look in her eyes. Harry had to honestly admit he was afraid for his virtue.

"Alright," she said finally.

"Alright?" Harry asked faintly.

She nodded tightly, but refused to speak to him for the rest of the day.

"I'd recommend the invisibility cloak, mate." Harry looked sharply at Blaise.

"Just don't get caught, yeah?" Blaise said. Harry looked at his best mate thoughtfully.

"Maybe..."

After shining trophies in the trophy room (and having to do Tom Riddle's twice because Filch caught him spitting on it) Harry made it back to the common room and collapsed. Hogsmeade was the next day, and Harry talked to Astoria.

"Listen, I need a favor," he said softly. Astoria turned to look at him and closed her book.

"What's up, Harry?" she asked curiously.

"Well, long story short, I got in trouble the other day and I'm not allowed to go to Hogsmeade."

"I can't go either, Harry, I'm a second year, remember?"

Harry waved it off. "I'm still going to sneak out there, but I needed you to give me an alibi in case I get in trouble. Can you say that I was in the Slytherin common room the whole time, if anyone asks?"

Astoria shrugged. "Sure," she said. The gleam in her eye told another story.

"What do you want in return?" Harry asked bluntly.

"Well, why don't you pick me up some chocolate from Honeyduke's and bring me back a butterbeer?"

"Done," Harry said in relief.

"Ok," Astoria said cheerfully, and she returned to her book.

Harry ran into Blaise on his way out to Hogsmeade with Daphne and Lily. To his surprise, they met up with Hermione as well. Apparently she was friends with the Slytherins again. Tracey was with them as well, and she pointedly ignored Harry. He didn't bother trying to say anything, she would be happy soon enough when she saw him in Hogsmeade. Professor McGonagall was near the exit where they all left to Hogsmeade, and Harry waved goodbye to his friends and walked back towards the common room, bearing McGonagall's suspicious stare the whole time.

He doubled back once he was out of sight and reached the statue of the one-eyed witch with the hump, on the third floor corridor. He pulled out his map and checked to see the coast was clear. After ascertaining it was safe, he tapped the opening, muttered, Dissendium, and headed inside, the passage closing behind him. He slid down the stone chute and headed to Hogsmeade.

He emerged into the Honeyduke's cellar and snuck out, before removing the cloak and entering again to pick up Astoria's chocolate.

He headed back out and threw on the cloak, while searching the crowds for the familiar blond hair of Tracey Davis. He checked the Three Broomsticks, but they weren't there yet. He did get two butterbeers to go though, cast a stasis charm on one to keep it cold, and after making sure it was covered, slipped it into his pocket. He sipped on the other one as he waited for his friends.

He didn't have to wait long, as they all slipped inside and sat themselves at a table that had a clear view of the entrance, in typical Slytherin fashion. Invisibility cloak firmly on, he slipped into the empty space next to Tracey, before removing it and putting an arm around her. She squealed, before realizing it was Harry. Then she squealed again and hit him.

"I thought you couldn't come," Hermione said to him.

"If anyone asks, I wasn't here," Harry said with a grin.

Hermione huffed. Tracey kissed him and then glared at him.

"How'd you get here anyway?"

Future-Harry provided his answer for him. "Ask me no questions and I'll tell you no lies," a tight-lipped Harry responded, struggling not to laugh.

"I've heard the Weasley twins say that," Blaise said idly, "pretty much whenever they pass on products. Apparently, they've been trying to develop their own stuff on the side too," Blaise added thoughtfully.

"I shudder to think what they'll come up with," Daphne said, though her eyes sparkled in laughter.

"Oh I'm sure something that's capable of getting them expelled, if I know them," Harry said with a grin.

A couple of Hermione's Ravenclaw friends showed up so Harry slipped on the cloak and he and Tracey left. Surprisingly, Hermione opted to leave as well. The three of them headed to the Shrieking Shack and Harry whispered quietly to Tracey, making her blush bright red a number of times on the way there. When they did get there the three of them began to talk about inconsequential things. Although why Hermione left was brought up.

"Why didn't you want to stay with your Ravenclaw friends?" Tracey asked curiously.

"To be honest," Hermione said with a very unHermioneish giggle, "they're boring. All they ever talk about is studying. I have enough of

that as it is. They're nice enough, don't get me wrong, but all these classes are driving me crazy!" she said.

"Well I could have told you that you were crazy, silly Mudblood," a voice said. Harry was thankful he had kept the cloak on, because Malfoy turned the corner with Crabbe and Goyle in tow.

"Well what do we have here? The Mudblood and Potty's girlfriend."

"Well you certainly are more observant than I gave you credit for," Tracey said, the humor in her voice long forgotten. Harry whispered to keep him distracted, as he went around to out flank them.

"What do you want, Malfoy?" Hermione asked.

"What makes you think I want something? I just happened to think this area seemed like a nice place to breathe in," he said innocently. Nobody bought it.

"I don't understand why you always try to look for a fight," Tracey said sincerely. It caught Malfoy off guard.

"It's between me and Potter, and if you aren't on my side than you're on his."

"Did he do something to you?" Hermione asked.

"What happens between me and Potter is none of your business, you filthy little mud-"

Malfoy abruptly stopped talking because Harry had taken the opportunity to fling some mud straight into his mouth. Of course, he couldn't have picked better timing if he tried.

Tracey let out a snort. Hermione failed to repress her giggle as well.

Malfoy began spitting out mud. He looked around, trying to figure out who had slung mud at him.

"I think it came from over there!" he pointed dramatically, to a space about six feet to Harry's left. He had obviously moved out of the way upon throwing it, as the angle the mud hit could only have been from a certain area.

Malfoy picked up a stick and threw it in the general area he had pointed at. Naturally, it flew through the air without hitting anything.

Crabbe and Goyle both flexed their muscles experimentally, but the scene wasn't very intimidating.

"I guess this place really is haunted," Hermione said with a smirk. "Who knew?"

Harry lobbed a stick back at Crabbe, who did a pirouette in midair, trying to see who had hit him. The end result was him falling backwards. Goyle, flush with anger at the two witches laughing at him, headed towards Hermione and Tracey. Before Harry could do anything, Weasley appeared to "save the day," surprisingly hitting Goyle with a petrificus totalus. Harry had no clue the redhead had it in him. Unfortunately for Weasley, Malfoy decided the Gryffindor was the culprit who had hit him with mud.

"So," Malfoy said, with a smirk beginning to blossom on his face. "Think throwing mud in my mouth is funny do you?" Weasley, not known for his intelligence, began to laugh.

"Someone threw mud in your mouth? That's priceless!" Weasley roared with laughter. Malfoy closed the gap between the two of them. He pulled his wand in the process. Harry couldn't resist the opportunity and picked up some more mud. Right when Malfoy opened his mouth, Harry threw. His aim was true, and once again, Malfoy began spitting up mud.

"How did you do that?" he spat. "Your wand never moved." Malfoy's eyes narrowed maliciously. Harry decided now would be a good time to get out of the way. Unfortunately, Weasley thought so too, and he backed right into Harry's invisible body. Weasley fell straight to the ground, bouncing off Harry and hitting the floor.

By some sort of cosmic intervention, Harry's cloak managed to stay covering him, and his presence wasn't revealed. Malfoy ignored the strange occurrence, chalking it up to a cowardly Gryffindor unable to tear his eyes away from him.

"Not so funny now is it, Weasel?" Malfoy sneered. His wand lowered towards Weasley slowly, as if taking aim and contemplating where

best to hit the redhead. Harry didn't dare move, for fear of calling attention to his position.

Tracey and Hermione stood motionless, watching the encounter as if morbidly fascinated.

The first spell lifted Weasley clear off the ground. Scared, the redhead grabbed at the snow, hoping to find some purchase. Unfortunately, he grabbed Harry's cloak, which momentarily slipped. Malfoy saw a blur of dark hair and dropped Weasley in surprise. Losing all pretense, Harry backed away, fully covered once more.

"Potter?" Malfoy said incredulously. He fired a couple of spells aimlessly in the area he had last seen Harry. Thankfully, he missed, but Harry couldn't count on his luck anymore. He moved back behind Hermione and Tracey.

Malfoy decided that he was better served reporting Harry's presence back at Hogwarts and took off with Crabbe and Goyle.

Weasley yelled at Hermione briefly before leaving as well. Harry turned to the two of them, removing his cloak in the process.

"You need to get back don't you?" Tracey asked. Harry nodded. She kissed him briefly and pushed him towards the castle. Harry ran as fast as he could, slipped into Honeyduke's, maneuvered his way into the basement, hopped through the trapdoor, and ran through the passage as fast as his legs would take him. He pulled out the map, checked it, and saw Malfoy talking with Snape two corridors down. They headed to McGonagall's office. Harry cast a scourgify on his hands and robes, removing it of the map, he pulled open the statue, closed it swiftly, and with his cloak on ran as fast as he could back to the dungeons.

Unfortunately, he ran head first into Remus Lupin.

Lupin pulled his wand out and cast a stasis charm around the area quickly, before his eyes narrowed suspiciously. Harry froze on the floor and was at the Professor's mercy.

"Accio Marauder's Map," he intoned. Harry, frozen on the ground, could only watch the map as it broke free of his pocket, moving the

cloak as well. Lupin pulled the cloak off Harry and cancelled the charm.

"Harry," Lupin said quietly, though not at all surprised.

"Professor," Harry said neutrally.

"I see you have James's cloak," he stated, quite needlessly. Harry merely nodded.

"His father gave that to him the day he left for Hogwarts. Told him to Give 'em hell, as it were. Of course, James took that to heart. Recruited Peter Pettigrew and another boy right away."

"Sirius Black," Harry said.

Lupin looked momentarily surprised Harry knew the background, but nodded.

"I was pulled into the group when James took it upon himself to rescue me from some future Slytherins. In all fairness, they had left me alone; I was merely reading a book in the compartment. I was too nervous for anything else. I still couldn't believe I was actually going to be allowed to attend Hogwarts. But being invited with some people to talk to in a compartment, and to have some people who could be considered friends, well, I didn't want to pass up the chance. Thus, three became four, and once we were all sorted into Gryffindor, we were inseparable for life."

"At Hogwarts anyway..." Harry muttered. Lupin heard him. Nonplussed, he soldiered on.

"Yes, well, war does bring out the best- and worst- in people. Our little group was no exception."

"Mmm," Harry said non-committally.

"But that's really neither here nor there," Lupin said with a wave of his hand. "I'm more concerned about the present."

"What about the future?" Harry asked.

"Ironically, I learned the most important thing about the future from my first class in Divination. Here is the thing about the future. Every time you look at, it changes, because you looked at it, and that changes everything else."

"Sounds rather pointless to try and predict the future then no?" Harry asked.

"I would think so. But I don't make a habit out of trying to predict the future. I have enough trouble as it is in the present, which is what I would like to discuss if you would stop changing the subject, Harry," Lupin reprimanded with a small smile. "Professor McGonagall informed me you weren't to be going to Hogsmeade today."

"What makes you think that I did, Professor? I've been in the Slytherin common room."

"I wasn't born yesterday, Harry. Why else would you be running through the hall with an invisibility cloak covering you?"

Harry sighed. "If you must know, I'm avoiding a couple of girls," Harry ended in a whisper, shuddering for added effect.

Lupin couldn't find any fault with his answer. "A Slytherin until the end, I suppose," Lupin said. "Empty your pockets," he said with a sigh. Harry looked to Future-Harry for help in casting the Disillusionment charm. His prayers were answered. As he slowly emptied out his pockets, all the incriminating items were disillusioned and pulled out with the other items in his pockets.

All that was revealed to Lupin was a coin bag, which was subsequently inspected and shown to only hold coins (with Astoria's chocolate hidden inside), a wand, and a mirror, (with the butterbeer sitting inconspicuously in his hand).

Lupin bit on the two-way mirror, ignoring the disillusioned butterbeer as Harry hoped he would.

Harry let the mirror be taken from him and slipped his hand back into his pocket, replacing the butterbeer and leaving it in there.

"We use it to chat with a friend in Gryffindor. They aren't very-happy- with our friendship, so we try not to flaunt it."

Lupin grimaced. "I knew two people like that as well." He quietly returned the mirror, lost in his thoughts.

Harry slipped away and made it safely to the common room, and gave Astoria her bribe before he realized Lupin still had the map and he had no idea how Lupin knew he had it.

Chalk up a point for Lupin being from the future.

Harry ran into Hermione later that day and mentioned what happened to Hagrid with Buckbeak. She yelped, having apparently already discovered this. Unknown to Harry, Hermione often visited Hagrid to chat. She wasn't exactly the most popular person in school, and Hagrid sympathized. She had been researching information to help Hagrid with the trial and his hippogriff.

"I honestly don't think he has a chance. Realistically anyway, they won't listen to Hagrid. He's a Hogwarts dropout, and a half-giant to boot. That's just how the Wizarding society works Hermione. It's essentially who you are, more so than what you can do. That's how it's always been. Old families have the power, and they keep it. Their power comes from old money. Malfoy is a very old family, with money flowing from everywhere, and Hagrid going against him is like a Muggle trying to attack Voldemort. There's no point."

"But what if Professor Dumbledore helped?" Hermione countered. "He has political strength."

"First of all, he won't waste it helping one of Hagrid's creatures."

"But Buckbeak is innocent!" Hermione yelled, scandalized.

"And as the centaurs would tell you, the innocent are always the first to suffer. Innocence doesn't matter in a corrupted society. Power and Money do. But I digress. In Dumbledore's eyes, in the grand scheme of things, Buckbeak is a trivial matter. Malfoy will push the issue, because any chance he has at whittling away at Hogwarts reputation means one more strike against Dumbledore. Eventually he can have him thrown out of the school. Besides, Dumbledore's power comes from respect of his abilities and accomplishments. Malfoy, on the other hand, has everyone in the Ministry paid off. They aren't exactly afraid of Dumbledore, because as long as they

don't do anything strictly evil, Dumbledore won't harm them. Sentencing an innocent animal to death really doesn't constitute retribution from Dumbledore, and from Malfoy's testimony, Buckbeak won't sound innocent anyway," reasoned Harry.

"But it's just not right," Hermione complained.

"Government rarely is," Harry replied sagely.

"There's got to be something we can do." Harry resisted the urge to smirk and decided to take a dig at Hermione.

"Short of reversing time or freeing Buckbeak before he's executed, but after he's seen by the Ministry, there's really not much we can do." Hermione looked extremely nervous when Harry mentioned time travel.

Of course, the fact that Hermione had a time-turner might have had something to do with it. Harry had already used it once this year. And according to Future-Harry he would be using it again. Specifically to save Sirius.

Saving Sirius would only happen because the ex-convict had dangled the possibility of becoming an animagus in front of Harry, who wasn't about to give that up. Harry found Sirius slightly annoying- and unstable quite frankly- but he still had his uses.

"We can't reverse time that far though," Hermione pointed out. "It's not possible." Although Harry had traveled back in time almost seven years, sort of, that wasn't supposed to be possible. But then, Muggles found magic to be impossible, no? The realm of impossibility, according to Future-Harry, couldn't possibly exist. Not after what he'd been through.

On a burst of insanity, Harry tried to Apparate through Hogwarts wards. He didn't move. All that happened was a very suffocating feeling surrounding him and pushing every fiber of his being together, uncomfortably so. Harry stopped a moment later.

"Damn," Harry said softly. "Oh well."

"You okay, Harry?"

"I'm fine," Harry replied with a grin. "I have to go!" Harry said immediately and ran away.

"Wha- why?"

"Quidditch!" Harry yelled. The overly exaggerated sigh of "boys," did not go unnoticed.

Practice with Flint, while brutal, did not impress Future-Harry. Wood was allegedly much worse. As Harry hadn't lived through the torture that was an Oliver Wood Quidditch practice, he could only nod to placate the time-traveler.

The fact that he was being pelted with Bludgers didn't exactly put him in a good mood. He did notice Snape walking away from the school, heading past the wards though, which made Harry curious. Especially since he saw him pull a cell phone out of his robes, presumably dial a number, and put it to his ear. He couldn't think about it for long though because two Bludgers had just punished him for his inattention, leaving him bruised and battered. Flint's yelling was easily ignored in lieu of the now throbbing headache. Harry managed to grab the Snitch nearby him, which momentarily appeased Flint, but did nothing for the headache.

Three hours later, when practice finally dispersed, Harry felt like he needed a levitation charm just to make it to the locker rooms. Riding his broom sufficed, and the shower he got felt utterly amazing. Limping back up to the school, he made it inside and back to the common room, left to his thoughts about Snape and Lupin.

Gryffindor was upset by Ravenclaw, which was very fortunate for Slytherin, because now they just needed to beat Hufflepuff and the cup was theirs. Flint's murderous practices kept Harry extremely preoccupied, and as he didn't have the map to try and find Wormtail, he was stuck.

Fortunately, a break in the monotony came soon enough when their last match of the season came up: Slytherin v. Hufflepuff.

Harry headed down to the pitch, Malfoy's glare burning into his back. Tracey wished him good luck and gave him a chaste kiss, Blaise clapped his back enthusiastically, reminding him that he had another bet going on this match, and Hermione, Lily, and Daphne all gave

him quick hugs before they headed back up to the stands and Harry into the locker room.

"Alright, this is it," Flint stated. "We win this, we win the cup. So don't blow it. This is my last year here-"

"He said that last year too," Montague muttered.

"And we should have won last year. So don't screw this up. It's Hufflepuff, so I expect a thrashing. You will sorely regret a poor performance out on that pitch. Do your job right, we win the game. Bole, Derrick, focus on their Chasers early, concentrate on whichever one looks like they're having a good game. Bletchley, try to keep the Quaffle out of the hoops for Merlin's sake. I know you were against me in practice, but try and stop something. Montague, Warrington, just keep it together. Don't let them steal the Quaffle from you; you're better than they are. Potter! If you don't get that snitch it better be because you're dead because I won't accept any other excuse. Take their captain out early if you can, a penalty is worth it if he's shaken up and always watching his back. Now let's get out there and beat these idiots."

Three-fourths of the stadium booed as the green and silver clad Slytherin team took their warm-up lap around the pitch.

The Hufflepuffs appeared amidst loud applause, but many of the Slytherins had cast the sonorous charm and made their boos heard.

"I want a nice clean match," Madam Hooch stated firmly between the two captains, but Harry knew the match would be anything but.

Flint crushed the Hufflepuff captain's hand as best he could, and the two opposing Chasers glared at each other.

The sharp whistle prompted the glare to dissipate and Slytherin was in possession of the Quaffle. Harry could hear Lee Jordan, the colorful, biased commentator, giving his thoughts on the match.

"And Slytherin in possession of the Quaffle, a win here today secures them the cup, although dirty tactics and underhanded playing really shouldn't be rewarded..."

"Jordan!" yelled Professor McGonagall.

"Just calling it how it is, Professor," Lee called back.

"The shot by Flint, fortunately saved by Hufflepuff's Keeper, David Robertson, and he throws it back into play. Chaser Steven Stevenson, creative name there from his family, nailed by a Bludger from Bole, and Montague picks it up. He loses it to a nice hit from one of the Hufflepuff Beaters, didn't see which, Stevenson picks it up and- YES! Ten-zero to Hufflepuff!"

Harry swore and began looking around for the snitch. In the background he could hear Flint telling off Bletchley while Warrington took off with the Quaffle.

Harry circled the pitch, being tailed by Cedric Diggory. Future-Harry informed him that Diggory handed him his first loss in a Quidditch match, catching the snitch before him. Harry had already lost a Quidditch match, but he didn't miss the snitch. However, Diggory was bigger, consequently slower, and the weather wasn't offering him any advantages, so Harry decided he should easily win this match.

His trusty Nimbus Two-Thousand responded to his movements, and Harry decided to test how fast Diggory could fly. He quickly spun around on his broom and dove at an angle towards Diggory, but at a spot where he could conceivably win.

"Potter's seen the snitch! Get there Diggory! Don't let the snakes win this one!" The noise of the crowd rose to a dull roar.

Harry reached his hand out in a way so that Diggory couldn't see what he was reaching for, and slowed down slightly, as if waiting for the snitch to turn and not wanting to fly by it. He was flying downward and Diggory caught up to him, nudging him and trying to find the snitch. Harry suddenly looked forward, knowing he was near the ground already, and predictably drew Diggory's eyes. He reached downward and pulled up at the same time.

Diggory wasn't so lucky. He plowed right into the ground. Harry flew back up and took the time to scan the skies, high-fiving Flint along the way. Diggory got back onto the broom after a minute and returned to looking for the snitch, keeping a wary eye on Harry.

One of the Hufflepuff Chasers grabbed the Quaffle and was headed alone on goal, so Harry flew right at them, and at the last second cut in front, causing her to shriek and her shot slipped wide left.

"After a questionable no call from Madam Hooch on what should have been an illegal move by the Slytherin Seeker, Hufflepuff's Megan Jackson misses the shot, leaving the game at Forty-Two, in favor of Slytherin," Jordan finished with a groan.

Megan and Chris Collins both weren't doing that well for Hufflepuff, but Steven had made both of his shots so far. Therefore, he became Bole and Derrick's target. They fired two bludgers back to back, clipping Steven's shoulder, and the tail-end of his broom, sending him careening into the stands.

Boos and even small projectiles were hurled from the stands, but Madam Hooch had been too busy calling the foul on Hufflepuff when one of their Beaters had clipped Flint with his bat. Amongst indignant yells, Slytherin was awarded a penalty, extending their lead to thirty.

"Call it both ways, Madam Hooch! You have to watch those snakes like a hawk!" Jordan yelled. McGonagall made no effort to correct him, angering the Slytherins.

Diggory pulled up level with him.

"You aren't winning the cup this year, Potter."

"Keep telling yourself that, Diggory. If you're the only person in between me and the snitch, I like the odds of Snape giving Gryffindor house points better."

Diggory glared, and jerked his eyes slightly left, he suddenly burst to the side and flew away. Harry spun around quickly, wondering what Diggory had been looking at-

Only to take two Bludgers into the face and stomach, dropping him about forty yards before he could right himself.

"Brilliant Bludger work by the Hufflepuff Beaters! Take that, Potter! You needed to be taken down a couple notches anyway!"

"Jordan!"

"You know it's true, Professor. Look at that cocky, arrogant bast-"

"LANGUAGE!" shrieked McGonagall.

"Well, regardless," Jordan began. "The Slytherin Seeker should be down for a bit, and that's karma if you ask me, but Slytherin still maintains the lead, Sixty-Thirty."

Harry blearily wondered if he did something to piss off Jordan or if the Gryffindor just hated him on principle.

Harry ducked under a Bludger as he struggled to make his way back up to a good vantage point but the Bludger reversed and nailed him in the back, jerking him forward on the broom.

Bole swung at the Bludger and yelled at Harry to duck. He did so and the Bludger grazed his hair before slamming into Stevenson, breaking his left forearm if the crunch was any indication.

Through sheer determination the Muggleborn still managed to make his shot through the hoop, cutting his team's deficit to ten.

Harry saw a flash of gold to his left and reached for it-

Only to be slammed by Diggory from his right and a Bludger from his left. The Bludger hit second, slamming him back into Diggory, making the snitch disappear again. Flint called a timeout.

"Why the hell are they so close?" Flint yelled.

Bole and Derrick shrugged. "Luck?" one of them ventured. Harry was too busy trying to stay standing.

"Why am I getting killed out there is a better question," Harry offered.

"What are you whining about Potter?"

"I'm getting attacked by these Bludgers. Could you guys try keeping them off of me?" Harry asked in frustration. "Or would I be better off going up there with a bat?"

Derrick growled.

"Potter, get the snitch. You're capable of dodging a couple of Bludgers. So do it."

They took back to the air and the match continued to get worse. Hooch had to call a couple of penalties for unprovoked attacks on players- both for the Hufflepuffs- amid raucous yells of support.

Jackson scored both of them and Hufflepuff took the lead by twenty.

"And Jackson properly punishes the Slytherins, putting Hufflepuff up by twenty after making a pair of penalty shots. Good girl! And the Beaters are just relentless towards Potter; I've seen a Bludger going after him almost every time I've checked. He won't be able to look for the snitch at this rate."

For once, Harry agreed with Jordan's assessment- at least partially. Future-Harry offered up that someone had tampered with the Bludger. To take out some frustration, Harry had flown next to Bole, taken his bat, and nailed the Bludger straight at Diggory. It hit with a satisfying thud, before bouncing back and nearly taking Harry's head off.

He considered Future-Harry's thought and decided it had some merit. This thought was punctuated by the whoosh of air behind Harry which signaled the approaching bludger, forcing him to contemplate his situation with half his body hanging off his broom.

"Any ideas as to who?" Harry asked to Future-Harry.

"Riddle? Wormtail? Bellatrix, Rookwood, or Dolohov? Dobby? Dumbledore?"

Harry slipped when he heard the final accusation, which was fortunate because the Bludger missed him again.

He eliminated Riddle by virtue of having the other three freed Death Eaters available, and Wormtail he decided wouldn't have the time or want to risk getting caught, although he was still admittedly a suspect. Dobby would only have motivation to do this if Malfoy told him to, which Harry doubted. Dumbledore... while Harry's argument in favor of the ancient wizard was the resounding, it's Dumbledore,

for Merlin's sake- that was his only defense. But there was nothing to indicate Dumbledore would send it after him either.

He decided to use the rogue Bludger to his advantage and noticed it was beginning to follow him now, so he used it to break apart Chaser plays, letting the Bludger slam into player's in his wake. He had to move frequently because his Nimbus wasn't a Firebolt, but he was Harry Potter, and he refused to let a little thing like speed stand in his way.

After successfully breaking up the play, he spotted the snitch, but Diggory was closer.

Harry flew straight at him, but went slow enough for the Bludger to catch up to him. Diggory had already spotted the snitch and was heading right at it. Future-Harry realized what Harry was going to do about five seconds before he did it.

"Nobody has ever done that before, Harry."

"That's why it's going to work," Harry countered. And right before the Bludger impacted him he slowed down to zero, pulled his broom straight up and kept pulling, essentially flipping his broom to make himself flip backwards in midair, continued the flip once he had righted himself until he was lying perpendicular to the ground on his broom and had nailed the Bludger with the Nimbus's tail. The Bludger soared at Diggory and managed to slam into his arm, sending him swerving sideways and completely missing the snitch. Harry's broom was beginning to fail because hitting the Bludger had snapped some of the bristles in the back, so he jumped onto Bole's broom, shoved him off onto the Nimbus, and flew the rest of the way towards the snitch.

Diggory had recovered from the blow and he had righted himself and flew the way Harry was heading, but it was obvious he had lost sight of the snitch. Harry hadn't. He pushed Bole's broom as fast as he could and he was headed straight towards Diggory. Fortunately, the snitch loped him and doubled back towards Harry underneath Diggory's broom, and Harry managed to make the catch. He held the snitch up proudly, then did a quick search of the skies for the Bludger. He didn't see it anywhere so he let loose the breath he was holding.

Unfortunately, Harry hadn't looked above him, and that's where the Bludger had been hiding. It nailed him in the head and he collapsed onto the broom, unconscious.

Fortunately, Daphne Greengrass was quick on the uptake, and Harry was close enough to the stands that she managed to cast a sticking charm on his hands, keeping him on the broom.

Flint had already been flying towards Harry to congratulate him and managed to guide the broom down, preventing any further harm from occurring. Bole was already on the ground because Harry's Nimbus had already given out.

Harry was whisked away to the Hospital Wing to be placed under Madam Pomfrey's meticulous, torturous care, leaving the Slytherins slightly worried about their Seeker. Therefore, it was a slightly downtrodden group that took the Quidditch Cup and presented it to Professor Snape, although he seemed unfazed by the events that had transpired.

Tracey, Daphne, and Lily all headed off to the Hospital Wing, Hermione not too far behind them, to check on Harry. But Blaise had another problem present itself. A problem that had blond hair and was staring at him with a serious expression that looked unnatural on her face. She also had a wand behind her ear, but that wasn't what called Blaise's attention. It was the wand in her hand- his wand- and it was pointed right at his heart.

Chapter 24: A Trip Through the Rabbit Hole

"I need you to come with me," Luna Lovegood said softly. Blaise had no choice but to follow, she had his wand and it was pointed right at him. She spun him around and directed him onto the grounds, away from the crowd leaving the Quidditch Pitch.

Blaise watched as they approached the Whomping Willow, and it suddenly stopped swinging. He assumed Luna had something to do with it, but he didn't rightly know since he wasn't looking at her. She directed him into the tunnel and kept him at wandpoint as they walked through it until it opened up, revealing a house which Blaise recognized as the Shrieking Shack.

She sat Blaise in a nearby chair and kept him from moving.

"I've been told your father can help me." Blaise gave her a blank look.

"Our printing press was stolen, and without it we can't continue writing the Quibbler. The regulations on printing presses are so ridiculous; you can't have one unless you already do."

"That's the pureblood way of controlling the media," Blaise pointed out. Luna shook her head, her wide eyes staring at him.

"Can he help?"

"It depends on what they're doing with the stolen printing press. I can mention it to him to keep an eye out," Blaise said reasonably. "I assume you're Luna Lovegood?"

She nodded.

"I'll see what I can do."

"A rat!" Luna squealed. Blaise rolled his eyes. The rat scurried behind him. "Women," he muttered. Then, everything went black.

Daphne, Tracey, Lily, and Hermione were all crowded around Harry's bed as Pomfrey bustled about.

"Will he be alright?" Tracey asked anxiously.

"Humph," Poppy said. "He just has bruises along his side, a slightly cracked rib, fractured arm, a mild concussion, and two contusions on his lower back. It shouldn't take too long to have him back up and causing trouble all over again."

Daphne resisted the urge to snort. Tracey leaned over Harry and squeezed his hand affectionately.

They sat around waiting for Harry to regain consciousness as Pomfrey applied various salves to Harry's injured body.

"Well at least he got the snitch," Lily said.

"Lily, he could have died!" Hermione said. "And all you care about is Quidditch? You're worse than Ron Weasley."

"I resent that," Lily fired back. "Besides, Harry would agree with me."

"And has Harry always been right?"

"When has he been wrong?"

"All the time, I'm sure," Harry croaked.

"Harry!" they all cried in unison. He suppressed a grimace. He lifted his good hand to his ear and shoved the other ear into the pillow.

"Noise... bad..." he muttered. They laughed. Tracey swooped down and kissed him swiftly.

"You had us all worried," she said. The other girls nodded. Harry looked at each of them in turn.

"Well it's not that bad. I got the snitch didn't I?" he said cheekily, mainly to annoy Hermione.

It worked. She huffed at him but couldn't conceal her relieved smile.

"Where's Blaise?" he asked curiously.

"He was right behind us wasn't he?" Daphne asked, turning to Lily.

"I thought so," she replied.

The Hospital Wing door opened, admitting a tired looking Blaise Zabini.

"You alright?" Blaise asked.

"I should ask you the same question," countered Harry. Blaise waved him off.

"Had to get my winnings," he said with a saucy grin. Harry smirked.

"Nice to know someone is profiting from my misery."

"Well I won double since you got knocked out." Harry tried to muster up a glare but it didn't come off properly.

Everyone else laughed.

"Well, we'd better go, finals start tomorrow and I, at least, need to study," Hermione said.

"Typical," muttered Daphne. Hermione blushed.

"I should also," Tracey said.

"Also typical," muttered Lily. Daphne and Lily suppressed a chuckle.

"Time to go," Blaise said, clapping his hands. They all abandoned Harry in his moment of need, leaving him alone in Madam Pomfrey's clutches.

Harry moaned. "Don't leave me alone with her! She'll kill me!"

"I'm a nurse, Potter. My job is to make sure you don't die," Madam Pomfrey replied, swooping in from her office.

"It's the perfect cover," Harry countered, a maniacal gleam in his eye. She sighed and shoved a potion down his throat. Harry pretended to gag, which turned into a real gag- healing potions do taste awful after all- and shuddered before trying to lay still.

"Good try, Mr. Potter." Harry sighed and moved again. "Worth a shot," he said with a grin. Madam Pomfrey shook her head.

Exams started and Blaise caught an illness, which didn't bode too well for him. He had to drink a potion hourly to keep the virus inside him from spreading. Harry felt sympathetic for his best mate.

Blaise wasn't the only one getting Harry's sympathy. Hagrid had also lost his appeal for the Hippogriff, and a day after exams were over, Buckbeak was to be executed.

It was with a heavy heart that Harry took his exams, but he felt like he did reasonably well. He also began to keep a sharp look out for Wormtail; according to Future-Harry he had made his reappearance at the end of the semester. He told Blaise to keep an eye out for a rat with a toe missing.

Harry had walked out of the Great Hall and headed towards Gryffindor Tower to talk to Hermione, but he was confronted by Tracey.

"Hey Tracey," Harry said with a smile. He was greeted with a slap in the face.

"Don't Hey Tracey me, Potter. I can't believe you had the nerve to do that."

"What are you talking about?"

"You and Herm-!" She slapped him again.

"Tracey, are you mad?"

"I'm furious!" she shrieked. "I saw the two of you come out of a broom cupboard. It's over!" She slapped him again and stalked off. Harry was confused, and Blaise came up behind him just as clueless.

They found Hermione and the three walked outside discussing the situation about Buckbeak with Hermione and Blaise.

"We should probably go visit him," Hermione said.

"It wouldn't hurt. He's pretty sad about Buckbeak," agreed Harry. Harry was about to bring up what just happened with Tracey but Malfoy appeared.

"Talking about that bloody beast, are you Potter? Let it go, he doesn't deserve to live anyway. He's just a filthy half-breed, like your little friend there."

Hermione glared at Malfoy. So did Blaise. But Hermione's face turned red with anger. She had already been stressed out from exams, which she had told Harry about, and on top of Buckbeak, it was no small wonder that last shot made her crack. She went to punch Malfoy right in the face-

But surprisingly it wasn't Hermione's fist that hit him, but Ron Weasley's.

Malfoy dropped to the ground, whimpering in pain, while Weasley stood there smirking and rubbing his fist.

"He shouldn't talk like that," Weasley said.

"I could have taken care of it myself," Hermione shot back.

"I know," Weasley replied, "but I've wanted to hit him for much longer than you have. Trust me."

Harry found himself not repulsed by Weasley's company, which was a first.

"I hate that bloody git," Weasley spat.

"You're not the only one," Harry commented. Weasley looked at Harry for a bit.

"Yeah, I guess you're right," he said gruffly.

"Is this like 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend?'" Hermione teased.

"No!" they both returned.

"I won't ever be friends with you, Potter, just so you know," Weasley said.

"I'm not looking for friendship; I've filled my quota of Gryffindor friends."

"Well, well." Weasley had already decided he could never befriend Potter, not after what happened to Percy... That point had been further driven in when his parents had written him a letter about visiting Percy in St. Mungo's for his birthday. He was still unresponsive. They just didn't have the heart to stop taking care of him.

"Well, we're off to visit Hagrid if you'd like to go," Hermione offered.

Harry looked at her sharply. Blaise merely shrugged and drank his potion for his sickness.

"Are you still sick, Blaise?"

"Another day or two is what Pomfrey said."

"Sorry mate," Harry said, clapping him on the back.

"Sure," Weasley said finally. The four of them headed down to Hagrid's cabin, making the oddest group of people to visit him yet. Hagrid opened the door and looked at them, surprised.

"Hello," he said, his eyes red. Buckbeak was tethered in the garden off to the side of the house. "Come in," he said roughly.

"They're comin' soon ter kill Beaky," he said with a sob.

"I'm sorry, Hagrid," Harry said, patting his arm comfortingly.

"You did what you could," Hermione said consolingly.

"It wasn't enough!" Hagrid said, before breaking down again. "It's just not fair," he mumbled.

"Let me get tea," Hermione said, and she began rummaging around in his cupboard. Blaise went over to help.

"Zabini, is that a rat?" Weasley asked suddenly. Blaise shrugged.

"Yeah, why?"

"Is it missing a toe?" he asked quickly. Harry perked up at that.

"Yeah, why?"

"SCABBERS!" Weasley yelled. He ran and clutched the rat to him greedily.

Harry swore under his breath. He never told Weasley about Wormtail. This could be touchy. Better to stun the rat when they got outside, then reveal the animagus.

"You lot should get goin' because they'll be here soon. I don't want you seein' it."

The foursome nodded and left the cabin, on the way back to school.

"Listen, Weasley, about your rat," Harry began tentatively. Blaise pulled out his wand and cast a spell at the rat. It took off, right towards the Whomping Willow. Future-Harry chuckled in his mind.

Some things never change.

They took off after the rat, casting spells at it. Suddenly, Sirius, in his grim form, took off after the rat too and chased it into the passage to the Whomping Willow. Future-Harry began laughing even harder in Harry's mind.

Harry glanced back at Hagrid's and saw the executioner's axe come down. Buckbeak's time had come.

The four of them chased after the rat and the dog, which had thoughtfully prodded the knot to freeze the tree so they could follow.

Weasley made it out of the passage first, followed by Harry. Hermione was behind him and Blaise brought up the rear.

When they got in, Harry saw spells flying. Sirius, in his dog form, was already stunned on the floor, and Weasley took the next curse. Hermione fell forward into him, dropping her wand, but helping Harry to dodge the next curse from Pettigrew, and Harry was able to stun

him from the floor. He scooped up Hermione's wand and pocketed it, then spun around and was disarmed by Blaise.

"Blaise?" Harry asked questioningly.

Blaise began to laugh.

"You're a fool, Harry Potter. Just like your father."

"What are you on about, Blaise? What the hell are you doing? Give me back my wand."

"You don't need it."

Harry watched as the stunned Pettigrew turned into Blaise Zabini, and the Blaise in front of him became Peter Pettigrew.

"Polyjuice..." Harry muttered.

"Naturally. And it worked so well. What sickness needs a potion once an hour? Really, Potter, I thought Slytherins prided themselves on intelligence."

"That's the Ravenclaws," Harry said.

"Whatever," Pettigrew said dismissively. "We're going to make a deal."

"A deal?" Harry asked. "What are you talking about?"

"Well, take a look around the room. Zabini, Granger, Weasley, and Black. All out of the way at the moment. And you don't have a wand. So you are going to do what I say."

Harry slowly began to pull Hermione's wand out as he kept his eyes on Pettigrew.

"They all escaped," Pettigrew said. Harry stopped his efforts to pull out the wand. It could wait. Pettigrew had information.

"Who?"

"Bellatrix, Rookwood, and Dolohov. I heard things. Voldemort is back. He freed them."

Harry already knew this. But he wanted to know what Pettigrew would add to it.

"What's your point?"

"I need to get out of the country. You're going to help me."

"Why?"

Before Pettigrew could answer, Lupin burst into the room and fired a curse, but Pettigrew dodged, transformed into a rat, and ran to another room. Lupin took off after him and searched the room. Harry pulled Hermione's wand out and enervated Blaise, Sirius, and Hermione. He left Weasley where he was. Then he saw a rat dart past him and he managed to stun it.

"Got it, Lupin!" Lupin ran back into the room and took the stunned rat from Harry. Sirius had transformed back from his dog form, scaring Hermione, who tried to curse him, but Harry still had her wand. The effort was rather fruitless, and Harry suppressed a grin.

"Now we can kill him, Remus," Sirius said.

"What is going on here?" Hermione asked. Blaise looked confused too. They both turned to Harry.

"I think we should explain," Harry said softly. Remus and Sirius both turned to him.

"You know how my parents were betrayed by a close friend?" Harry asked. Hermione and Blaise nodded.

"I don't remember how much I've told you all, but it was Pettigrew who really betrayed my parents. Sirius here was originally the Secret Keeper but he switched to Pettigrew. Pettigrew was a Death Eater and turned my parents over to Voldemort. Sirius ended up getting arrested for the crime. Rem- Professor Lupin here, is a werewolf-"

"I knew it!" Hermione cried. Remus sighed.

"So my father, Pettigrew, and Sirius became animagi to be with him during the full moon. Sirius is that dog you saw earlier, Pettigrew was formerly Scabbers the rat. My father was a stag."

"That's right," continued Sirius. "And I escaped- well it's not important how I escaped," he amended hastily after a sharp look from Harry, "but I had to get Peter, so I could have my name cleared. I hadn't killed anyone."

"Not for lack of trying," someone else said. Everyone turned to the door and had their wands summoned from them.

Sirius stared at Snape in shock.

"Severus," Lupin began.

"I don't want to hear it, Lupin. You'll get yours in a moment."

"Black, I know a dementor that is dying to kiss you right now. We'd better not keep him waiting. Although it may be a her; I really don't care."

"I'm innocent, Snape," Sirius protested.

"Innocence does not work for you, Black. How about that little trick of yours from fifth year?" Snape's eyes flashed menacingly. Sirius paled.

"Haven't mentioned that have you?"

"What happened, Professor?"

"Miss Granger, you are lucky you're still alive, stay out of business that is none of your concern," Snape snapped.

"What did the bastard do, Professor Snape?" Blaise asked. Snape smiled. It looked very dangerous.

"As you know, Lupin here is a werewolf. I had practically uncovered his secret. Black, and the rest of his Marauders, thought they would try to help me out, although really they were just trying to kill me. Black sent me to the Whomping Willow and told me to prod the knot at the base of the tree so I could find out what Lupin was up to. He

had already transformed and was in the shack waiting for me. Potter got cold feet at the last second and pulled me back before I would be killed. He didn't want to get in trouble, you see. A dead student is hard to talk your way out of, even for James Potter."

"How fitting, that it will be your end here tonight, instead of mine," Snape sneered.

"Look, this rat is Peter Pettigrew; with him I can prove my innocence. Let us revert him back to his human form," Sirius pleaded. Snape stared at the rat for a second, and then smirked.

"And if he's not?"

"Then let the dementors have me," Sirius said confidently. Blaise and Harry both looked at Snape. He knew something. Harry thought back quickly over what had happened. They had chased a rat in here, and then Blaise had turned into Pettigrew. That meant the rat they chased wasn't Pettigrew. What if the rat Sirius had wasn't Pettigrew...

"Very well," Snape said. Harry knew Sirius was doomed. And with him went Harry's animagus training. He couldn't very well let that happen.

Snape waved his hand for Sirius to cast the spell, and a flash of blue-white light erupted from Sirius's wand, enveloping the rat. It fell to the floor and remained there. The rat wasn't Pettigrew.

Snape chortled. Sirius stared between the rat and the wand in his hand. So did Lupin.

"Impossible..." Sirius and Lupin both muttered. Snape cast an incarcerous at Sirius and he was wrapped up in ropes.

"Maybe the dementors can spare the werewolf a kiss as well." Snape pointed his wand at Lupin and smiled.

"I didn't see that coming," Lupin said softly. He looked to Harry.

"What a happy day," Snape said.

Snape decided to stun Blaise as well for safe measure and directed Lupin out at wandpoint holding Sirius to help him out. Snape instructed Hermione to help Weasley out and Harry to help Blaise. Snape got them out of the Whomping Willow before he realized his mistake.

The full moon was up, and Lupin hadn't taken his potion. Snape swore. He began firing spells at Lupin but Sirius managed to tackle Snape to the ground through the ropes.

"Trying to kill me again, Black?" sneered Snape. "Your little plot didn't work last time, it won't work now either. What a strange sense of déjà vu."

He shook Sirius off but Lupin had already transformed and was heading straight at Snape.

Harry stared in horror as Snape took aim at the approaching werewolf. He pulled Hermione's wand out of his pocket. He couldn't let Snape kill Lupin. He needed to know if he was from the future or not.

The wand caught on a pocket of his robes and Harry pulled it out but was holding it the wrong way.

"I won't miss you, Lupin. Avada Kedavra!"

Harry tried to conjure something to block the curse, but he wasn't fast enough. However, Lupin, in his werewolf form, was fast enough. He managed to bite Snape in the wand arm, but Snape's spell was still right on course, dropping the werewolf straight to the ground, unmistakably dead.

Harry stared at Lupin's body in horror, and his attention was caught by a rat running off. A rat with a wand in its mouth.

"Wormtail," Harry snarled, and he took off after him.

"Harry!" yelled Sirius, and he transformed, getting out of the ropes, and took off after Harry. Hermione was left with two stunned students and an angry potions professor.

Snape strode off quickly. He didn't think he could get away with killing them, although it was tempting. He had more important matters to attend and he didn't have the time. Although staging a death by werewolf would have been believable, but he honestly didn't have the time.

Harry began firing spells at Wormtail but the rat kept dodging and Sirius was trying to catch him in his mouth. The rat dodged too much for them and suddenly dove into a hole. They caught up to the spot and Sirius began to dig into the hole while Harry began casting reductos.

The rat was nowhere to be found. Suddenly, Harry began to feel cold, and Sirius fell over to the side, weakened dramatically. He transformed back to a human and collapsed.

Future-Harry whispered in Harry's mind- dementors.

Harry spun around, Hermione's wand in hand, and tried to face them. There were almost a hundred dementors and at the front was Snape, pointing the way to Sirius.

Harry tried to cast the Patronus Charm, but it was feeble at best, nonexistent at worst.

He went through a series of happy thoughts, ranging from being sorted to Slytherin- which fizzed between strong and a mere puff-winning the cup, which produced a semi-corporal haze- and pranking Snape, which finally got Prongs the Patronus to appear in all his glory.

Prongs held off three of them before he disappeared. Snape had already vanished.

Future-Harry just kept urging him to hold on and think happy thoughts. Future-Harry managed to temporarily take hold of Harry's body- which had never happened before- and cast a Patronus thinking of how he had the opportunity to see everyone again who had died.

The blinding flash of light that came from that patronus held the dementors off long enough for reinforcements to arrive, in the form of Hermione, Professor Dumbledore, and sadly, Minister Fudge.

McGonagall was with Blaise, Weasley, and the body of Professor Lupin, and she brought them into the Hospital Wing.

Sirius was locked into a room to await the dementors, Harry was stuck in the Hospital Wing with Hermione, and they heard Snape talking to Fudge outside the door.

"Well done, Professor Snape, you have done this country a service. Order of Merlin, First Class, I daresay." Fudge's voice sounded rather fixed. It was strange to Harry's ears.

"Thank you, Minister."

"We have Black locked up and will be sending the dementors to him shortly. It's fortunate they didn't harm Potter," Fudge stated.

"If Potter would have stayed out of the way, this would already have been dealt with," Snape said shortly.

"Quite right, quite right, we'll have to have a talk with him." Harry heard footsteps.

"I've just finished speaking to Sirius Black. I will handle it from here, Cornelius."

"Not to worry, Dumbledore, I'm here to make sure we cut off all the loose ends, as it were."

"Yes, we need to clean this all up properly," Snape said silkily.

"Well, let's go get the dementors. Would you care to join me, Professor Snape?"

"I'd be happy to," Snape replied.

Dumbledore walked into the Hospital Wing and saw that Harry was awake.

"Harry, Hermione. We need to talk." Blaise and Ron were both still out, and Harry and Hermione looked at Dumbledore questioningly.

"I presume we all know that Sirius Black is innocent," he stated.

Harry and Hermione nodded. "However, we have no proof. And Professor Snape has a much more believable account of the events that have transpired tonight. His will hold up to scrutiny. Without Pettigrew, ours will not."

"What can we do, Professor?" Hermione asked. Harry, due to Future-Harry, already knew what was happening. Future-Harry had been expecting this since they followed the rat to the Whomping Willow. While they had taken a much different road to get there, they had still arrived at the same point.

"What we need, is more time." Hermione's eyes widened.

"Sirius is in Professor Flitwick's office on the seventh floor. Thirteenth window from the right of the West Tower. If all goes well, you will be able to save more than one innocent life tonight. But remember this, both of you: you must not be seen. Miss Granger, you know the law, you know what is at stake... You-must-not-be-seen."

"I am going to lock you in. It is five minutes to midnight. Miss Granger, three turns should do it. Good luck."

The door closed behind Dumbledore. Harry headed to Hermione swiftly as she fumbled with the neck of her robes.

"Get the time-turner already, let's go. We don't have time," Harry hissed. Hermione stared at him in shock. But to her credit, she just prepared to send them back in time.

She put the chain over both of them and turned it back three times. They landed in the entrance hall and looked thoroughly disheveled.

"Quick, broom closet, someone's coming," Harry said urgently. They closed the door behind them as someone turned the corner. The footsteps died away and they opened the door and began to head towards Hagrid's to save Buckbeak, which Harry had explained in the closet. They headed down there as fast as they could, but both of them missed the narrowing eyes of Tracey Davis burning into their backside.

They were ahead of the confrontation with Malfoy, and Harry heard the screaming of Tracey Davis as she broke up with him.

"Did Tracey just break up with you?" Hermione asked.

"Through an unfortunate and entirely unforeseeable series of circumstances that had nothing whatsoever to do with me, yes."

Hermione snorted. "What happened?" And then it dawned on him.

"She must have seen us come out of the closet together. She was yelling at me about being in a broom closet with someone."

"I'm sorry," Hermione said.

"It wasn't meant to be," Harry said with a shrug. "Not really. I think we're better as friends anyway."

Hermione didn't know what to add to that. Malfoy spared her the trouble.

"Here comes Malfoy, looks like we're about to see Weasley throw a punch."

The scene replayed as they had expected it to and they followed the foursome to Hagrid's, hiding off to the side, looking at Buckbeak.

"Now, we'll have to free him after the Ministry's execution committee sees him. We won't have a lot of time."

"Okay," Hermione replied. "So that must be what Dumbledore meant! We can save Buckbeak!"

Harry grinned. They waited awhile, saw the four of them leave again and head off, and then watched as the committee walked towards Hagrid's. They spotted Buckbeak and knocked on the door, heading inside. Harry quickly pulled the rope apart and bowed to Buckbeak, who looked at him and bowed back. He then pulled him by the rope towards the forest and they were able to sneak him away without incident.

"Excellent, that worked well," Hermione said.

"It was a lot easier than I expected." They heard the thud of an axe as the executioner swung it in frustration.

"Now we wait," Harry said. "Fairly anticlimactic, huh?"

Hermione chuckled nervously. "We should head to the Whomping Willow to see what's happening."

"Agreed," Harry replied, and the two of them headed there. Everyone had already entered the passage and they got there just in time to watch Lupin enter the tree.

"Next is Snape, then we wait until we all come out."

"Remember, we mustn't interfere, Harry," Hermione reiterated.

"There's got to be something we can do for Lupin," Harry said.

"We can't! If we save him, his werewolf form will still be alive, and be able to attack us. Who knows what could happen! There's nothing we can do."

Harry swore. "You're right." Then he ran. "Wait here!" Hermione shouted a loud whisper at him, but he cast a disillusionment charm and was gone. He had to know if Lupin was from the future. He headed up to the room and made it when Snape began to lead everyone out. He tried a non-verbal Legilimens three times before it worked.

He got one surface thought from Lupin: Damn, I forgot to take the potion.

By that point they had exited the tunnel and Harry had to get out of the way as Lupin transformed, but the young wizard was thoroughly frustrated. He wouldn't get an answer to his question. Although it mostly sounded like Lupin wasn't, because he would have remembered about forgetting his potion the first time.

Future-Harry reminded him about Sirius though. If Lupin came back, Sirius did too. Harry nodded resolutely, and he returned to Hermione to wait until Sirius was taken up to Flitwick's office. Hermione moved near the spot where Harry and Sirius had been attacked by the dementors to see what was going on, and when they would have to

head up to the Tower. She would come back for Harry and Buckbeak when they had been taken up to the school.

Harry began a conversation with Future-Harry.

"We were able to produce that Patronus, it was pretty strong. Don't you think we're ready to take on Voldemort?" Harry asked.

Future-Harry pondered the idea.

"Let's get Sirius out of here first. Then we'll talk about it."

"Fair enough," Harry replied.

He waited patiently for Hermione but ended up deciding to go to the spot himself. He got there just in time to see his Patronus, which prompted a gasp from Hermione, and they watched as he and Sirius were taken back to the school.

"Well, about ready to save Sirius?"

Hermione looked a little nervous. "We'll just fly up on Buckbeak to the right window. Shouldn't be too difficult."

"I hate flying," Hermione muttered.

"You want me to stun you and cast a sticking charm?" Harry asked with a smirk. She swatted him.

"No, I'll be fine. I'm a Gryffindor, right?"

She sounded more like she was trying to assure herself, so Harry let her be. He waited for someone to leave the castle to get the dementors and saw Fudge and Snape walk out five minutes later.

"Now," Harry hissed. He hopped on Buckbeak's back and Hermione jumped on behind him, holding him tight. The two flew up and up and up, Buckbeak's wings beating furiously. Harry guided him towards the West Tower and began counting windows. Hermione was muttering about her hatred of being in the air, causing Harry to chuckle.

"I really don't like this- oh no- this is horrible- oh!"

"Whoa!" Harry had cried, pulling back on Buckbeak's rope, causing him to come to a stop, only now hovering in midair. He knocked on the window and Sirius looked up in surprise. He still looked completely miserable.

Sirius stood up and moved to the window. Hermione whipped out her wand and cast the unlocking charm, springing Sirius from the office.

"Get on," Harry said urgently.

"What- how?" Sirius asked weakly.

"You honestly didn't think I'd leave you to the dementors after I went to all that trouble to get Wormtail, on top of what you promised me did you?" Harry asked with a grin.

Sirius shook his head. He hopped onto the back, sandwiching Hermione and giving her a bit more comfort since she wouldn't fall off backwards as easily.

"Up!" Harry commanded. Buckbeak landed on the battlements and Harry and Hermione dismounted from the hippogriff.

"Get out of here, the dementors are coming for you," Harry said briskly. "Owl me."

"How can I ever thank-?"

"Get that potion finished already. Bring it by Privet Drive during the summer."

Sirius squeezed his shoulder. "I'll see you soon, Harry. Deep down, down here," he said, putting his hand over Harry's heart, "you truly are your father's son. Regardless of what house you're in, you possess the same qualities that made your father a good person. You're a good man, Harry. Always remember that."

Speechless, Harry could only nod. Sirius took off on the back of the hippogriff, leaving Hermione and Harry watching him go.

"We need to get back to the hospital wing, Harry. We have ten minutes. Let's go!"

They moved down the stairs swiftly, having to pause a couple of times when they heard voices. Fudge and Snape would be returning with the dementors any minute!

They heard Peeves cackling ahead of them and ducked into a closet.

"How horrible," Hermione mumbled. "He's probably happy Sirius is going to be kissed."

"Well, not anymore, at any rate," Harry said. Hermione smiled. They heard his voice fading away and they left the closet and kept walking quickly.

They turned the corner and ran. "Two minutes!" Hermione said breathlessly, checking her watch.

"Let's move then, I don't want to know what will happen if we don't make it back in time."

"Don't talk about that, Harry," Hermione said.

They reached the end of the corridor that held the Hospital Wing and saw Dumbledore outside of the door, his wand out.

"Good luck," they heard him say.

"Professor," Harry hissed. Dumbledore looked up and saw them. He stopped from locking the door and ushered them inside. He looked eyes with Harry.

Harry nodded. Dumbledore smiled.

"We'll talk later," he replied, and locked the door behind him. Harry and Hermione quickly got into their respective beds and sat quietly, waiting for the outburst that was surely imminent.

"Mr. Potter, you're awake," Madam Pomfrey said. She demanded he eat chocolate. Harry happily complied.

After Harry's fourth piece of chocolate a primitive scream of rage vibrated the very foundation of Hogwarts.

"I SHOULD HAVE KILLED HIM MYSELF!" Snape roared.

"We should have left someone with him," Fudge could be heard saying, trying to placate the absolutely livid Severus Snape, who was practically foaming at the mouth. "He must have Disapparated."

"YOU CAN'T APPARATE OR DISAPPARATE INSIDE THIS CASTLE! THIS— HAS— SOMETHING— TO— DO— WITH— POTTER!"

"Severus, be reasonable," Fudge pleaded.

"THIS IS REASONABLE! POTTER HELPED HIM ESCAPE! I KNOW IT!" Snape barged through the doors of the Hospital Wing, Fudge and Dumbledore behind him.

"NO ONE MAKES A FOOL OUT OF ME, POTTER! OUT WITH IT! WHAT DID YOU DO?"

"Professor Snape! Control yourself!" shrieked Madam Pomfrey. A wave of Snape's wand silenced her.

"Really, Snape, Harry has been in here the whole time," Fudge said.

"YOU— DON'T— KNOW— POTTER!" Snape stalked to Harry's bed menacingly. Harry began to get a headache. Snape pointed his wand directly at Harry.

"Would you prefer Legilimency or Veritaserum?" he whispered dangerously. Harry tried to grab his wand but Snape blasted it away from him.

A shield sprang up between the two of them. "That will do, Severus," Dumbledore said, a hint of steel in his voice. Snape waved his wand and cancelled out Dumbledore's shield spell, prompting a raised eyebrow from the venerable headmaster.

"Not quite, Dumbledore. He helped a murderer escape. Black was capable of murder at sixteen, if your memory is still as sharp as it used to be. Tom Riddle was capable of the same feat."

Dumbledore's eyes lost his twinkle completely.

"How do you know that?" Dumbledore asked.

"Irrelevant," Snape said dismissively. "I want this foolish boy interrogated. I, as his head of house, will follow through with that. You have crossed me one time too many, Potter."

Snape pulled a bottle of Veritaserum out of his pocket and amid Fudge and Dumbledore's protests poured five drops, more than necessary, on Harry's tongue.

Harry thought furiously. He could use Future-Harry to help evade some of the questions, as well as plausible deniability he hoped. His higher thought processes had slowed down tremendously. This would be difficult.

"What is your name?" Snape asked.

Harry thought about saying Tom Marvolo Riddle, but thought better of it. "Harry James Potter."

"Where were you when Sirius Black escaped tonight?" Snape asked. Technically, Harry had been in two places at once.

"Hospital Wing," Harry replied in a monotone.

"There," intervened Dumbledore. "Unless he could have been in two places at once, he had nothing to do with Black's escape," reasoned Dumbledore.

"Did you help Sirius Black escape?"

Harry decided that Snape was talking about Sirius's escape from Azkaban.

"No," Harry replied.

"That's enough. Dumbledore, you know the use of Veritaserum is closely monitored by the Ministry. Having a member of your staff use it in front of me, the Minister of Magic? What are you playing at?"

"Severus has just suffered a severe disappointment," Dumbledore replied with a weary sigh. "I presume you'll have the dementors out of here? They nearly kissed Harry here."

"Of course, they'll be gone by morning."

Snape was still trying to figure out what to ask Harry. "The antidote, Severus?" Dumbledore asked. Snape pulled it out and administered it to Harry. Snape looked furious; Harry could have sworn his eyes had flashed red.

The antidote was taken by Harry and he was no longer compelled to tell the truth. Snape looked him in the eye. "One day, Potter. One day."

Harry stopped by Lupin's office the day they were leaving and took back his Marauder's Map. Dumbledore was there waiting for him.

"An ingenious creation, was it not? By some of the more- shall we say- inspired wizards of a generation."

Harry merely nodded mutely.

"Such a tragedy that befell the four of them," Dumbledore said sadly. "One dead, one traitor, one betrayed and in jail, and one left to mourn the other three, and is now also dead."

"Hopefully it doesn't foreshadow our own fate," Dumbledore said with a sigh. He had seemed tired lately, and Harry felt like taking it out on the headmaster, but he knew it was childish. Dumbledore at the moment seemed like he had a large burden on his shoulders and was unloading it on Harry. No that wasn't quite accurate, more like confiding in Harry.

"It seems like the more I try, the more people I fail," Dumbledore stated. "I apologize, Harry, for any pain I may have caused you, directly or indirectly."

Harry grunted in acknowledgment. "I will try to get through to Severus, I do not know why he was unable to control his emotions, although his complete and utter hatred of your father and his friends is certainly to blame for his blindness to his own actions."

"Will anything happen to him since he killed Professor Lupin?" Harry queried. Dumbledore shook his head.

"While the death of Professor Lupin was quite regrettable, it was clearly a case of self-defense, as the Professor had been attacking him as a werewolf. Professor Snape even suffered a bite, which may or may not cause him to transform into a werewolf every full moon. Also, werewolves are not afforded the same status as normal witches and wizards, thus killing a werewolf would be akin to slaughtering an animal."

"That's a fairly prejudiced Ministry viewpoint from the way you paint it."

"It's merely the way it has been. Ironically, it is similar to how the Muggles persecuted the Wizarding World in general. Of course, I doubt the irony would be appreciated."

Harry snorted. "You did a good job the other night, Harry. I'm very proud of you."

"Thank you, sir," Harry replied. "But it wasn't enough. Lupin was killed and I couldn't capture Peter."

"You still managed to spare an innocent man a horrible fate, and stayed the hand of the executioner on the matter of a proud Hippogriff."

"Would you consider it a victory for our side or a loss?"

"Peter may cause problems, but Remus and Sirius essentially traded one life for another. Either one would have happily given their life up to protect the other, that was the strength of their friendship. It had suffered an inordinate amount of trials and had crumbled once, but managed to repair itself on the loyalty that still remained. You are the last viable link connecting them Harry, and regardless of your feelings for Sirius Black, know he would willingly lay his life down to protect you. He's a good man to have at your back."

Harry didn't bother asking how Dumbledore found out about his turbulent friendship with Sirius. He also never noticed that Dumbledore didn't answer the question. "Speaking of Sirius, has he

explained to you the circumstances surrounding his escape from Azkaban right?"

"Yes," Dumbledore said. "It worries me that he has an oath to Lord Voldemort. It also worries me that Lord Voldemort was strong enough to break into Azkaban, while my sources told me he had been in Albania. I have a suspicion it had something to do with that diary we saw last year. I fear that a cunning, powerful, and ambitious sixteen year old Tom Riddle has been thrown into this war as well and is fortifying his own side. It feels like the calm before the storm. Bellatrix, Rookwood, and Dolohov have all been mysteriously silent upon their release. Why Fudge claimed to have freed them is beyond me. I cannot fathom any of his actions and I have talked with him on numerous occasions to try and understand him. I checked for the imperious curse but it didn't seem to be present. Polyjuice is possible but unlikely. Also highly unlikely is a mind controlling potion. Sadly, I fear that he is acting on what he believes to be is right, which is just as dangerous. Uncertain times lie ahead for us, Harry. I ask that you remain vigilant. Peter escaping could be the least of our worries."

"Where do you think Peter will go now?"

"He will most likely try and find Lord Voldemort. He will need protection, and Lord Voldemort is the only one in the right position to offer it. I fear next year may see the return of Lord Voldemort."

"Will we be able to stop him?" Harry asked. Dumbledore seemed to hesitate, and was on the verge of saying something, before he stopped. Looking back at this moment, Dumbledore was about to tell Harry the prophecy. Had he done so, it more than likely would have created a flood of memories the Voldemort in Harry's head would have been unable to stop and Harry would have been traveling a much different path. However, Dumbledore was reluctant to impart that knowledge at this juncture, thus unknowingly keeping Harry on a road that was quickly becoming paved with good intentions.

The words: will we be able to stop him, floated in Dumbledore's mind for a moment as he took the time to seriously consider his answer without revealing the prophecy. The only answer he had was hope.

"I hope so, Harry. I hope so."

They had announced at the feast that Lupin had died defending students. The banners were black in honor of his passing.

He had retold what happened to Blaise and the rest of his friends, filling them in on the events that had transpired. Blaise had apologized profusely, explaining Luna Lovegood had needed his help on something and Pettigrew had attacked him. Looking for Luna, Harry saw her sitting at the Ravenclaw table eating without a care in the world.

"Pettigrew is out there," Harry said bitterly. "He wanted to leave the country though, we'll see what happens."

"Better to just wait until next year. Leave it be," Daphne advised. Harry left the table to have a long overdue talk with Tracey.

"Just so you know, me and Hermione didn't do anything together," Harry said softly.

"I know," Tracey replied. "I think we're better off friends though."

"Yeah, neither of us really knew how to act, did we?"

Tracey chuckled. "It was a good first relationship though. Thank you, Harry," she said with a smile and kissed him on the cheek. The conversation was a lot faster and easier than he had expected.

Soon enough, they were on the train and heading back to King's Cross, leaving Harry to think about the things that had been bothering him.

How did Snape get a cell phone, and who was he talking to?

Were he and Future-Harry ready to take on Voldemort inside his head?

What were Bellatrix, Rookwood, and Dolohov up to?

What would Wormtail do now?

Where was the diary-Riddle?

Where was Voldemort?

What were the contents of Sirius's oath to Voldemort/Riddle, whoever it was?

Were Lupin and Sirius from the future?

Would he be able to become an animagus?

Those were the burning questions in Harry's mind. The coming school year would bring an answer to all of those questions. As the Hogwarts Express pulled into the station, Harry knew that next year would be a hell of a lot different.

He walked up to the Dursleys and Vernon gripped him roughly.

"You're going to wish you had never been born this summer, boy. Don't think I forgot how you killed my sister, you little freak," he said in his best effort of a threatening tone. The effect was truly lost on Harry. He actually wanted to crack a smile, remembering how his accidental magic gave Aunt Marge a heart attack.

Suddenly, all of Harry's friends- and their parents and siblings- swarmed Vernon.

"Leave him alone," Mr. Greengrass said dangerously. Mr. Zabini nodded as well, holding his wand pointed right at Vernon's heart.

"You'd be better off not messing with Harry," Pollux Moon said while his twin, Castor, glared as well, as if trying to burn the message into Vernon's eyelids. Harry wondered if there was a curse to etch an image into someone's eyelids.

"See all the trouble you started?" Harry asked his uncle.

"Well- I didn't think—" he sputtered.

"That's just it," interrupted Harry. "If you don't think, then you shouldn't talk."

Harry spun around abruptly and left to the car that would take him to Number Four Privet Drive.

"Oh, by the way," Harry said when Vernon approached him. "I've faced the guy who murdered my parents. And I was unafraid. Do you really think I'd be afraid of a great big Muggle like you? Stay away from me, and maybe you won't end up like your sister."

Book 4: Harry Potter and the Horcrux Riddle

Chapter 25: Forewarned is Forearmed

Privet Drive had always seemed fairly monotonous to Harry, and this summer was no exception. On the bright side, his relatives had come to the conclusion that bothering Harry at all could have severe consequences. Fresh in Vernon Dursley's mind was the memory of his sister dying. He didn't want to risk Harry going through with his threat. Therefore, Harry had a lot of time to himself. The homework assignments had been done quickly and efficiently. In all honesty though, Harry was just putting off the conversation he needed to have with Future-Harry. Two weeks into the break, Harry realized he would have to have this conversation.

"So can we take him out?" Harry asked, pointing towards the Voldemort guarding Harry's remaining future memories.

Future-Harry was pacing, they were on Harry's mental reproduction of the grounds of Hogwarts. He still remembered the day he had started organizing his thoughts and Hogwarts had seemed the ideal location.

"I think we have a shot of gaining a lot of our future memories. We may need it for this year. I don't think we can defeat him yet, but we can weaken him."

"When?" Harry asked.

"Now's as good a time as any," Future-Harry said with a shrug.

Harry stared. "You're kidding."

"Nope."

Harry drew his wand, and so did Future-Harry.

"What happens if you get killed in this fight?" Harry asked.

"It's possible the future memories might just disappear completely. Or they may all remain there. I have no idea. I would cease to exist though. Similar to the horcrux that had been in your head and was hit by a killing curse in your mind. All that remains is the piece of

Voldemort that came back with me. Remember, this is your mind. You make the rules. You just have to believe that you can break them. Hold him off and I'll try and free the memories."

Harry nodded. The rules of magic and logic did not apply in your mind. In the future, he would realize Luna Lovegood truly understood this concept, Harry only thought he did.

Future-Harry disillusioned himself and began walking slowly towards Voldemort. Harry grabbed his Nimbus two-thousand which had materialized, unbroken and in all its glory, and kicked off, preparing to come at Voldemort from above. Harry approached near the representation of the Forbidden Forest and started things off quickly by dive-bombing Voldemort. He spun around and conjured a flame whip that he hit Harry's broom with, instantly catching it on fire and forcing Harry to crash land, but he managed to slam straight into Voldemort. With the two of them otherwise occupied, Future-Harry began attacking the shield holding the future memories, and gradually the hole was opening, allowing memories of Harry's fourth year to appear and they ran for cover to the castle with Future-Harry keeping watch for stray curses.

Harry and Voldemort had risen from the ground and Voldemort quickly conjured a dragon to try and protect the memories. Harry began thinking as hard as he could, imagining that the atmosphere above eight feet in the air did not have oxygen. The dragon didn't have much fight in him before it died from inhaling too much carbon dioxide. Voldemort and Harry began dueling in earnest, and Harry realized right away he was completely outclassed. He was quickly on the defensive and was being driven away. He had yet to fire more than two offensive curses, and both of those had been easily avoided by Voldemort.

He quickly pressed towards the castle, and away from the shield of memories as Voldemort continued his relentless assault. Harry batted away one curse and ducked under another before deciding he'd had enough. Remembering what Future-Harry had said, he tried to break all the rules of the real world. He began to dodge faster than he thought possible, his wand movements became quicker, and the battle slowly turned.

But just as suddenly, he had a loss of concentration when Future-Harry yelled, and his speed returned to normal, and Voldemort

suddenly overpowered him and disarmed him. Future-Harry summoned the wand before Voldemort could get it and the two of them retreated back to the relative safety of the castle, leaving Voldemort to mourn his losses.

"How'd we do?" Harry asked.

"Pretty good," Future-Harry said. "I remember a lot more of fourth year now. The Tri-Wizard Tournament is coming up. You're going to be in it."

Harry nodded resolutely although he had no idea what the Tri-Wizard Tournament was.

"Three schools traditionally compete for the Tri-Wizard cup, thus explaining the name. Hogwarts, Beauxbatons, and Durmstrang will each have one champion, if you will, to try and bring home the cup."

"So you entered this thing?"

"No," Future-Harry said with a grin.

Harry began to sputter.

"I was entered by a Death Eater at Hogwarts. Your new Defense Professor, Alastor Moody, is actually a Death Eater under the Polyjuice potion."

"They seem fond of that, Pettigrew just used that with Blaise," Harry commented.

"You'd think they'd be more creative," Future-Harry agreed.

"So what's the purpose of them entering me?"

"Good question. I think they want to kill you. We didn't make it that far memory-wise yet. There are three tasks you must complete, and I was able to get to the start of the third one before the damn dragon started attacking me."

"That why you yelled like a girl?"

Future-Harry didn't comment.

"The Tournament is essentially all that happens this year. We'll make sure whether or not you are entered, and if you are, we'll deal with the tasks as they come."

"Did we get any more memories besides fourth year?" Harry asked.

"A few scattered memories of fifth year and a couple from sixth, none of which make sense or seem to matter at the moment."

"Alright then," Harry replied. "Sort through them?"

"Of course."

Harry went to sleep, mentally exhausted.

Zabini Manor was currently playing host to Luna and Xenophilius Lovegood, who were speaking to Blaise and his father respectively.

"Menelaus, have you managed to locate my printing press? It is of the utmost importance, as I'm sure you are aware. The Quibbler cannot operate without it, and I know you understand the importance of keeping the Quibbler in circulation."

"Xeno," Mr. Zabini said placatingly, "I'm doing the best I can, but it doesn't appear to have been stolen with intent of resale. Someone has taken it for their own purpose. I've searched through the portkey transportation, international floo, and other magical means of travel. If it has left the country, it has left by Muggle methods. There is not much I can do to help you beyond what I have attempted. You will have to replace the printing press."

"Can you even comprehend the amount of work that would take? The spells on that printing press are so ancient, even I don't know all of them that were on it."

"Xeno, again, I offer my sincerest apologies, but I believe you're talking to the wrong man. There's nothing I can do to help you. Had you updated your wards, like I had suggested-"

"Menelaus, that wouldn't have solved anything and you know it," Mr. Lovegood snapped.

"I am merely pointing out that the perpetrator could have been identified. A healthy dose of paranoia can go a long way in preventing unfortunate events. Especially when people truly are after you. Do you believe someone has uncovered?"

"Impossible," Mr. Lovegood said quickly.

"Then I am truly at a loss. Perhaps someone wanted to print out pamphlets?"

"This conversation is not going anywhere, Menelaus. Forget I came here."

"I already have," he replied.

Blaise and Luna were both attempting to overhear their respective fathers, and the conversation that graced their ears made little sense to them.

"I understood the beginning," Blaise said. "But I have no idea what your Father is involved in."

"Yes, well I don't believe he does either," Luna said, smiling serenely.

"What's so important about the Quibbler remaining in circulation anyway?" Blaise asked. Luna gave him a mysterious smile and didn't answer.

Albus Dumbledore prided himself on being a patient man. He was also always in control of his emotions, and tended to know more than most about what was going on around him. At the moment, none of these qualities he possessed were readily apparent.

"What has gotten into you, Severus?" he yelled.

Snape merely stood in front of him, staring back with an almost bored gaze.

"I don't see the problem, Headmaster. I was merely ridding the world of a traitor. Surely you want the betrayer of Lily and James dead?" he asked with a shrug.

"Evidence surfaced proving Pettigrew was alive, and that he had in fact been the Secret-Keeper. I told you this already."

"I don't seem to recall, Headmaster." Snape was acting oddly formal. "Besides, I was merely following the law."

"Would you let a childhood grudge cause the death of an innocent man, Severus? You are a far cry from the man I thought you were."

"You don't know a single thing about me, Dumbledore. Don't be presumptuous. As for your innocent man, you seem to have conveniently forgotten he tried to kill me. So did Lupin for that matter. In my eyes, Lupin got what was coming to him. He was helping that scum into the castle anyway. Black was merely fortunate he didn't suffer a similar fate. I presume you know of his animagus form. An omission of truth seems to be cause for distrust in your eyes in my case, and you of all people should treat everyone fairly, no? It seems to me that it's a poetic justice. Black has tried to have Lupin kill me twice now. Surely you know the saying, fool me once shame on you, fool me twice... suffice it to say I do not get fooled twice."

"When did you become so heartless, Severus?" Dumbledore asked quietly.

"When did you become so idealistic, Albus?" Snape countered.

Dumbledore sighed and placed a lemon drop in his mouth to suck on quietly, staring down at his desk.

"You may leave, Severus," Dumbledore said. He looked up to watch Snape leave, but the Potions master had already departed before the dismissal.

"What have you done, my friend?" Dumbledore asked aloud. Fawkes squawked his indignant feeling about the leeway Snape was being given.

"He seems different, Fawkes. But he still seems to be familiar..." Fawkes ruffled his feathers and made a noise of assent.

Harry patiently waited until he would be allowed to leave Privet Drive and visit Blaise. That time didn't seem like it was coming. His birthday had already come and gone, and it was nearing the middle

of August. Dudley had been forced to be on a diet, and it was only through judicial threatening of magic use that prevented Harry from suffering the same fate. It was fortunate they didn't know he was not allowed to use magic over the summer holidays. Thus his threats were never seen as empty. If Harry had to admit it, he was enjoying the look on Dudley's face whenever he got to eat more food than the overgrown killer whale did. His eyes seemed to be permanently glittering in amusement now whenever he stared at his cousin.

Thus, with little to amuse Harry and no homework left to complete, he had found himself trying to build the guitar he had been gifted a couple years ago. It had slowly begun to take shape and the neck of the guitar had become completely carved. He had started work on the body of it and had managed to make it look roughly the way he wanted. But carving only captured his attention for so long, and at nights he had busied himself practicing Occlumency and sorting through the memories he and Future-Harry had obtained.

His fourth year had been a year full of betrayals and surprises, from all that he could see of it. Harry had been entered illegally into the tournament by a Death Eater who was disguised as Alastor "Mad-Eye" Moody, their new Defense Against the Dark Arts Professor. The tournament itself had involved facing a dragon, saving a friend from under the lake, and a maze that held the Tri-Wizard cup at the center, but that memory was incomplete. There was also a dance, and the Quidditch World Cup between Bulgaria and Ireland resulting in an Irish win but Viktor Krum, Bulgarian Seeker and future Durmstrang Champion catching the snitch. Harry could earn some big money off of that one.

He had eventually decided on letting the year play out and doing the best damn job he could to win the Tournament. The upper years in Slytherin House would have to respect him for it, the younger ones would admire him, and his year would hopefully back off. Malfoy hadn't been too terrible as of lately, but any pre-emptive actions Harry could take would be good. Besides, if the Death Eater was trying to kill him, he would not expect Harry to actually win the tournament.

Thinking like the Slytherin he was, he would have to keep one step ahead, and keep doing the unexpected. Not to mention, losing in any capacity would bring the wrath of Slytherin house upon him. It was not something he would be looking forward to in the slightest,

some of them disliked him because he stopped the Dark Lord, others disliked him because they were jealous, and others still because they felt he didn't belong. The few friends he had gathered in the past three years as a member of Slytherin house were all there for their own reasons.

Daphne originally tried to get to know him because of her father, but had decided he was an interesting companion. Astoria followed suit after her sister. Lily was probably just bored and thought Harry would be amusing. Tracey had originally been the Ravenclaw that got sorted into Slytherin but decided an outlet to use her knowledge was helpful, as well as friends to keep her grounded in real life. Hermione was too idealistic and wanted to believe in the inherently good part of people. The Weasley twins were business associates. Ginny was a fan, and he didn't really consider her a friend as they had spoken less than a dozen words to each other in person. The letters trying to manipulate her over the summer to get her sorted into Slytherin and piss off Ron didn't really count. Finally, that brought him to Blaise. He and Blaise had really just hit it off. No ulterior motives beyond finding someone to befriend. Their friendship was probably the strongest of them all. His and Tracey's would hopefully develop now that they had tried and failed a relationship.

Thinking of all his friends brought him inexorably back to Blaise and why he hadn't sent an invitation to his house yet. A couple of days later, the middle of August, he finally received owl post. He opened it, expecting to see Blaise's scrawled words.

Therefore, it was quite surprising when the letter that was delivered to his house was from Daphne and Astoria, asking him over for some of the holidays. He quickly penned an acceptance and two days later was whisked away from the Dursleys and introduced to the ancestral home of the Greengrasses.

He arrived in the entrance hall, the letter acting as a Portkey, and was quickly greeted by a house elf.

"Harry Potter, sir, we was to be expecting you. Master Greengrass is awaiting you in the foyer. Neenie be taking you now, sir."

Just like that, Harry was introduced to the formidable Aidan Greengrass.

"Ah, Mr. Potter, I'm pleased to see you have arrived in one piece. My daughters have informed me of your knack for trouble."

Harry laughed somewhat nervously as he shook Mr. Greengrass's hand. His presence seemed to radiate confidence and a sense that if you disagreed with him, you would suffer his displeasure.

"You could say that," Harry said with a grin. "Trouble seems to be my name as much as Harry."

Mr. Greengrass allowed a smile to grace his lips. "As long as you can keep my daughters out of it," he said, releasing Harry's hand. Harry smiled back nervously.

"Neenie," Mr. Greengrass called. She appeared with a pop. "Master called Neenie?"

"Can you please escort Mr. Potter here to Daphne's room?"

"Of course, sir," she curtsied, and led Harry out of the room abruptly. They ran right into Astoria, who fell backwards in surprise.

"Hi Harry," she said with a grin. Harry returned it.

"Eavesdropping, Miss Greengrass?" Harry queried. "I would presume that noble art would be beneath you." She stared at him with her mouth open before closing it abruptly.

"You'd be surprised what I'm capable of," she said, and then stuck out her tongue, thus ruining the effect. "Come on, Daphne's upstairs. She's dying to see you," Astoria said, rolling her eyes for added effect.

Harry laughed. "I'm sure she is."

"Well you're the only one that gets her to actually act like she has emotions, Harry," Astoria said pointedly.

"What are you talking about?" Harry asked, and then stopped as he stared at the magnificent living room he had entered. It was probably bigger than Number Four.

"Well, you wouldn't know how she acts when you aren't around her, would you?" she asked.

"As I don't take to spying and eavesdropping like you, no," Harry replied. Astoria ignored the shot and continued on.

"She normally tries to act all cool and composed, but she never knows how to act around you. It's quite funny actually. Give her another year, and maybe she just might figure you out. Until then, she's stuck trying to understand you. It's entertaining to hear her and Lily talking. Speaking of which, Lily likes you," Astoria said bluntly.

"I kind of figured," Harry said. Lily had made that clear last year, before he dated Tracey.

"So why'd you date Tracey?"

"Well, she seemed like the, well, safer of the two. She wasn't as overactive as Lily, and it was a normal relationship," defended Harry, as he began walking up the stairs behind Astoria.

"Sure Harry, whatever you say." Astoria didn't sound convinced, and didn't bother turning around to look at him. Harry chose to ignore her.

"What about you, have you been dating anyone?" Harry asked. Astoria looked at him.

"Oh, you know, a couple people."

"Like who?" Harry asked.

"Draco, Ron-" she began with a smile.

"What! Why? How!" Harry sputtered.

"Relax, Harry, I'm only kidding. I have much better taste," she said pointedly.

"I should hope so. Blind people have better taste," he said bitterly.

"Bitter much, Potter?"

"Me? Perish the thought."

Astoria smiled- a real one this time- and reached Daphne's door.

"Well this is where Astoria be leaving you, Master Potter, sir. Astoria is hoping you be having a good day," she said, imitating a house-elf, before skipping away to cause mayhem somewhere else. Harry shook his head and opened the door.

The sight that met him was fairly amusing, and an oddly cliché dream for a teenage male. Lily and Daphne, all thoughts of proper decorum long gone, were in the midst of a pillow fight, and Lily had Daphne pinned and laughing hysterically, crying for mercy.

Harry had three options. Continue to watch unabashedly, help Lily, or help Daphne. While the first had its obvious advantages, the second and third both involved physical contact, and the third would offer the best shock value. It also had the added bonus of involving the girl who liked him, which would make the scene that much more humorous. So Harry grabbed a pillow and joined the fray, knocking Lily off of Daphne who gave a shriek of surprise and began to hit her lightly with the pillow before tickling her mercilessly. Daphne grabbed a pillow and looked to be coming to Lily's rescue before she began hitting Lily as well without remorse. The laughter of the three teenagers was infectious and Lily was squealing under the double assault. Finally giving up, the three sat on the bed breathlessly, still laughing whenever they caught each other's eye.

"Hi Harry," Lily said, red from laughing so hard. Daphne greeted him with a hug.

"Thanks for the help," she said with a smile. Harry bowed extravagantly, prompting more giggles.

"Thanks for rescuing me from the Muggles, Miss Greengrass," Harry said with a grin.

"Tis a Pureblood's job, Mr. Potter," she replied, smirking.

"So did you hear the good news?" Lily asked.

"You guys get to spend the summer with such an entertaining and good-looking person as myself?" Harry asked. Lily punched him.

"Prat, no Daphne's father got us tickets to the Quidditch World Cup. The six of us are going to go watch the match. Ireland versus Bulgaria. Should be a good one."

Harry perked up at the announcement. Professional Quidditch definitely sounded entertaining. "Thanks, Daphne! That's brilliant!"

"Consider it a birthday present, Harry," Daphne said. "So you owe me a good one. I trust you remember what day it is?"

"November tenth, isn't it?" Harry asked.

Daphne patted him on the head. "I knew there was a reason we kept you around."

Harry sputtered indignantly, prompting the three to break into laughter again.

"When do we head over there?"

"We'll go the day of the Cup. It's a Monday night, a little less than a fortnight before we go back. We've got a Portkey they're sending to us that we can take straight there around lunch time," Daphne answered.

"Monday... isn't that tomorrow?" Harry asked. Daphne furrowed her eyebrows in thought.

"Hmmm, yeah, I guess you're right. Tomorrow night then."

"Lovely," Harry replied.

"You won't have to stay with us too long, so don't worry," Lily teased.

"Well, I'm just wondering what happened to Blaise," Harry answered honestly.

"Blaise?" Lily questioned.

"Yeah, I haven't talked to him at all. I'd have expected an invitation to his place by now."

Daphne and Lily looked at each other, communicating with their eyes the way women could, before Daphne seemed to nod slightly.

"Something came up with his Dad, we don't know what, but they had to leave the country for awhile. I think they were in... France, wasn't it?" Daphne ended, looking to Lily for confirmation. The blond nodded her head in answer, and Daphne looked back to Harry again.

"France," she said more confidently.

"Did he say why?"

"No, it was about the whole 'stuff my father does that I can't talk about' bit," Lily said with an amused smile.

Harry's eyes seemed to glitter in amusement, a habit he had made while looking at Dudley during meals. It would probably become his trademark this year, matched in infamy only by Dumbledore's blasted twinkle.

"Well, I suppose he'll have an interesting summer then," Daphne said.

"Especially if he runs into any Beauxbatons girls," Harry said with a smirk. The girls chuckled their respective pillows at him.

Harry managed to have a bit of a lie-in and woke up around eleven, in time for a light lunch with the girls. Mr. and Mrs. Greengrass were both polite to a fault but Mr. Greengrass still looked at Harry calculatingly. It was slightly unnerving. Mrs. Greengrass seemed like Petunia Dursley when she was entertaining guests- exceedingly pleasant but her manners didn't seem natural. Harry didn't try to think on it. Any comparison between the Dursleys and the magical world was probably not a good frame of mind to be in.

"We will be leaving shortly," Mr. Greengrass announced. "Lily, your brothers and parents are not attending, correct?"

"Yes, Mr. Greengrass," Lily replied primly.

"Alright. If you all will go get your supplies for the night, we will be leaving in thirty minutes."

He dismissed them from the table and the four of them headed up to gather their things. Harry was the first one back down, as his possessions that he would be taking along for the trip were minimal, amounting to a change of clothes and his wand. Daphne sent him back to his trunk to bring the spell catcher. It was actually used for a very fun game played in Eastern Europe and she wanted to teach him the basics.

Upon Harry's return, Astoria and Lily had managed to make their way down as well and the six of them were ready to leave. They gathered around the Portkey, a newspaper, and all held on before it whisked them away to the campsite for the Quidditch match.

Harry was unable to remain standing and hit the ground along with the three girls.

He heard Mr. Greengrass chuckling.

"The Greengrass Portkey is here," someone announced.

Harry disentangled himself from Daphne and Lily and the three of them managed to get up eventually, breathless and trying not to laugh.

They had arrived at the foot of a hill top and a pair of wizards who were trying and failing to pass as Muggles awaited them. Mr. Greengrass handed him the newspaper and it was tossed into a bin.

"Your campsite is a couple minutes walk this way, should be the first field you see. Site manager's called Mr. Keller."

Mr. Greengrass nodded abruptly and led the group of six towards their campsite.

Harry looked around, wondering if there was anyone he knew. Mr. Greengrass paid Mr. Keller and received a map of the campsite and they quickly set up camp. The magical tent they set up would easily fit all of them. Mr. and Mrs. Greengrass had a room to themselves inside and there was one for the three girls, and another just for Harry. He assumed the other was normally Astoria's but since more people were staying, it was split among the sexes.

Mr. Greengrass sent them to get water, and the three fourth years ran into some of the more fervent supporters of Bulgaria; Astoria had stayed behind to set up the room. Since they weren't wearing any colors declaring which side they were supporting, they were sneered at, while one or two of the boys they passed whistled at Daphne and Lily. The girls turned matching glares at this and had Harry not known any better he would have thought they could out glare a basilisk.

They passed by some wizards who were doing an absolutely terrible job of trying to pass themselves off as Muggles. Unless they were going for the cross-dressing look...

Harry shuddered and forcibly dragged his thoughts back into safer territory before he could imagine Ron Weasley wearing a lacey dress.

Harry received some glares of his own as they were walking, passing by Quidditch players he had defeated at one point or another. On the way back from filling up the water, Cho Chang caught his eye and she blushed. Harry was vaguely reminded of his first Quidditch match when he inadvertently kissed her in an effort to catch the snitch, securing the win by grabbing it in his mouth.

Harry felt like he had much more attractive girls currently at his side though, so he wasn't worried about his looks or embarrassed at seeing her. His future-self had apparently spilled water all over his stomach when he had seen her, prompting Harry to snort. He was starting to get better at controlling his emotions, as proper Slytherins should, and he could probably have Daphne help with Occlumency this year.

The return trip to the campsite was uneventful and they prepared their rooms the way they wanted while they passed the time by before the Final would start. Harry had his set up relatively quickly and headed to the girls' room to talk about the upcoming year. Daphne mentioned the Tri-Wizard Tournament and the four of them talked about that for the next hour.

Dusk arrived soon enough and the six of them headed off to their seats, passing by salesmen Apparating every few feet, and their money bags became considerably lighter as they bought various souvenirs. Harry picked up some Omnioculars and Lily bought a

flying model Firebolt, giving Harry a small pang in his chest as he thought about his old Firebolt. Technically Future-Harry's old Firebolt, but the feelings between the two of them was becoming more blurred as Voldemort's influence was slowly weakening. Harry was hopeful that by next summer the two could be fully merged and he would have access to all his future memories. As it now stood, he remembered this World Cup ending with Bulgaria losing the match, but their Seeker, Viktor Krum, capturing the snitch. Therefore, he placed a modest bet on that outcome; it never hurt to have more money.

He made sure not to make the bet with Ludo Bagman though. Leprechaun gold was worthless if it wasn't being used in an elaborate prank on Ron Weasley.

The Quidditch match surprisingly went about the same as it had the first time, with the same result occurring. Noticeably different was the lack of interaction between Harry and the Malfoys or Fudge or anything else that would have occurred in the Top box. Harry still succumbed to the Veela's influence, although not as badly as he had before. This time he just thought it would have been a good idea to summon one to him; which, in hindsight, was still a pretty good idea -except for the whole flaming bird from hell bit that the Veela had going on- so maybe not.

Harry remembered that there would be a bit of a revelry with the former Death Eaters later that night and debated the merits of doing anything about it. He decided against it, letting the night run its course without his influence. Any intervention on his part would cause more harm than good, drawing undue suspicion to himself. He was, however, pleased to note that Mr. and Mrs. Greengrass weren't among the former Death Eaters that wreaked havoc upon the Muggles during the Cup, at least not this time around. If they had the first time, well, he would not have known.

He knew this because they came and firmly announced what was transpiring.

"There are Death Eaters attacking," Mr. Greengrass stated. "A bunch of the ones that weren't imprisoned the last time around and are probably drunk. They're out just casting spells and causing a panic."

"What are we going to do?" Astoria asked.

"Nothing. We'll just remain here. It would be unwise to be seen involving ourselves on either side."

He gave Harry a significant look, before turning away abruptly. Mrs. Greengrass beckoned them to the kitchen, where she made them some food.

They sat and ate quietly amid the shouts from outside. Nothing happened to their tent, and the six of them remained unharmed. Harry was curious to know what happened, and if the Dark Mark was shot up. His answer came a bit later. Mr. Greengrass opened the tent to go outside and he left for about ten to fifteen minutes. When he came back in, he had a surprised expression on his face.

"They cast the Dark Mark."

The girls all gasped.

"Did they catch the person?" Lily asked.

Mr. Greengrass nodded. "I saw them getting taken to the Ministry for questioning. Had I not seen it with my own eyes, I wouldn't have believed it were possible." Harry looked up in surprise. Last time, it had been pinned on Winky the house-elf.

"Who was it?" Daphne whispered.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"Daddy?" Astoria asked. Mr. Greengrass gave a sigh.

"Ginny Weasley."

Chapter 26: Fight Fire With Water

"Weasley?" Harry asked incredulously.

Mr. Greengrass nodded solemnly. "She cast it herself. The wand was in her hand; the spell was the last one the wand had cast. Very damning evidence indeed."

Harry tried to fathom how Ginny would have come to know the spell.

"Was the wand hers or just one she picked up?" Harry asked.

"It was her wand," was the reply.

"Could she have been under the Imperious?" he continued.

"Possible, that's why she was taken in for questioning."

"Who found her?" Daphne asked.

"Barty Crouch, and some other people helping out. They Apparated in and stunned her."

"Was anyone else there?" Astoria asked. They all might not have been on the best of terms with the Weasley family in general, but Ginny was in Astoria's year, and it was difficult to comprehend.

"Not that we saw."

"Was everyone panicking about the Dark Mark?" Lily asked.

"Naturally," Mr. Greengrass replied. He walked across the room back and forth a couple times before stopping to look at Lily. "You were too young the first time around to really remember. The Dark Mark inspired- powerful emotions- wherever it went. An intense fear for some, pride for others. Of course now, only those who did not betray the Dark Lord would be proud of seeing the Mark adorning the sky once more. The others, those who claimed bewitchment and managed to escape Azkaban, well; they have more to fear than others. Fighting openly against the Dark Lord, or choosing to not take a side in the conflict, that's one decision. Openly denying association with the Dark Lord is another thing entirely. Defying his

will is not something to be done lightly, especially if you have to encounter him again. Few live to tell the tale."

The group became somewhat solemn after hearing Mr. Greengrass's pronouncement. "Get some rest. We'll leave in the morning."

The four Hogwarts students left to their beds, Harry leaving the three girls as he entered his own room. He was left wondering what had been so different that Ginny Weasley was seen casting the Dark Mark. The obvious answer was the imperious, possibly from one of the Death Eaters. Last time, Winky the house-elf had been left to take the blame. Barty Crouch Jr had been the real culprit, the man who would become Alastor Moody by means of Polyjuice Potion in the upcoming school year.

There was the incredibly unlikely possibility that she had done it of her own volition, but that was ridiculous –unless she was under the control of the Riddle from the diary...

But again, Harry highly doubted it. The question was now merely a matter of what Crouch Jr had to gain from imperiusing Weasley and having her do it, rather than do the act himself.

And Harry had absolutely no idea how Crouch benefited from this. He simply did not have the information.

"We should consider getting another source of information, possibly inside the Ministry?" Future-Harry suggested.

"Who did you have in mind?"

Future-Harry gave the mental equivalent of a shrug. "Fudge or Malfoy?"

"What?"

"You heard me."

"That's why I'm confused. Malfoy? How the hell would that happen?"

"You're a Slytherin aren't you? Figure it out."

Harry sent back a mental vision of him glaring at Future-Harry, who laughed.

The rest of the night hardly gave Harry any help in figuring out the current predicament he had landed in. Sleep came far too slowly and sunrise came far too quickly. Their departure was abrupt and they returned to Greengrass Manor a little worse for wear but nonetheless in one piece.

Harry was actually looking forward to this school year. Everything would start to happen now, according to his memories, so life would be a lot less dull and he could come up with new ways to screw everything up. It would be fun.

"Come in here, all of you," Mr. Greengrass said, bringing Harry out of his reverie.

"I have something to tell you all. The Tri-Wizard Tournament will be held this year at Hogwarts."

Everyone looked up in surprise, for the most part. Harry already knew, but still managed to react like it was news to him.

"Be wary around the French and Germans, I wouldn't trust them."

"What makes you say that?" Harry asked out of curiosity. Sure, Karkaroff was a Death Eater and an idiot, although Harry admitted to himself that was slightly redundant, but Fleur and Krum had seemed an okay sort.

"I have learned through experience not to trust the French. They have appeared to me to be inadequate in any sort of treaty-making and lack in manners. I once was an ambassador to France. I was treated worse than a house-elf, and scoffed at behind my back, simply because I was an English dog from Hogwarts. It was a miracle they could walk without hitting anything; their noses were so high in the air. In Paris they simply stared when I spoke to them in French; I never did succeed in making those idiots understand their language."

Harry let out a snort. "Regardless of their lack of respect to an Englishmen of nobility, I once had a friend who was French. I say once because he is dead. The two of us got into a fight against a

group of wizards and he decided to try and capture me and barter my life for his. He failed; I killed him," Mr. Greengrass finished simply.

"And the Germans?"

"I was fighting the Germans," he said pointedly.

"Oh," Harry said inadequately.

"That is all I wished to tell you. You may return to your other pursuits."

Harry and the girls went upstairs and talked about the Tri-Wizard Tournament, bringing up its significance and who they thought would compete for Hogwarts.

"So are you thinking about entering, Harry?" Astoria asked.

"I'm entertaining the idea," Harry replied. After all, a good performance could raise his reputation.

"I'm more concerned with all the new people who will be at Hogwarts," Daphne said.

"I'm more interested in seeing some of the French girls. I've heard they are... amusing," Lily said slyly.

Harry raised an eyebrow.

"You'd have to ask my brothers. But from what I've heard it is pretty entertaining to prank a French woman. I want to try it at least once."

Harry maintained eye contact with Lily, adopting a slightly bemused expression.

"What?" she asked innocently. Harry shook his head and failed to hide his grin.

"I might know a prank or two," Harry said with a grin.

"Well, Mr. Potter, I may be willing to accept your assistance, but I'd better be sure you are capable of being a prankster-in-crime. For all

I know, your sense of humor might be as bad as Tracey's time-consuming to the point of insanity studying habits used to be."

Harry could not in good conscience let that insult go unanswered.

So that night when Lily went to sleep, she found a picture of a pair of scantily clad wizards next to her pillow. Her screams woke the whole house.

"Merlin, Potter, you fucking whore! You put gay pictures next to my pillow! This is war! I'll kill you!" she shouted when she accosted him in his room. Harry laughed.

"Well, you didn't seem to believe in my capabilities."

Lily refused to be baited. "You just wait, when you least expect it... I'll get you," she ended dangerously.

The last two weeks proved to be fairly entertaining. Harry's bed and pillows vanished a couple days later and were replaced by pictures of wizards in fairly compromising positions that would have made most people blush. Lily came in gloating, along with Astoria, who had helped her out, and the summoning charm didn't seem to find Harry's bed. He opted to compromise by instead summoning Astoria's, banishing the pictures to her room, and bidding the two girls a good night.

Astoria and Lily stared at him in shock, trying to understand how he had managed to turn that on them. They snuck into his closet to strategize so another wave of Harry's wand brought the dresser over to lock them in. Harry was fortunate they didn't have their wands with them. The girls banged on the door in frustration and Harry left to Lily's room, intent on exacting his revenge. His bed had been much more comfortable than Astoria's. Harry took Lily's pillow and disillusioned it and put it under the loft, put an anti-summoning charm and an anti-locating charm on it, then brought the pillowcase along with him. He thought about taking her bed off the frame, it was lofted to give more space in the room, but he decided that wouldn't accomplish anything. Levitating it back up wouldn't take much effort.

He re-entered his room to discover Astoria and Lily had escaped, moved back her bed, and put the pictures back where they were. Harry tossed Lily's pillowcase on her head.

"I'll trade your pillow for my bed and pillows, and I'll also help you get your bed back on the loft," Harry bluffed.

Lily glared at him in rage.

"What did you do to my pillow?"

Harry whistled innocently. "I don't know. Why don't you bring my bed back here and you can find out."

Lily grumbled and brought Harry's bed and pillows back, which had been hidden the floor below them, and Harry replaced everything.

"Just cast a Finite Incantatem at the area under your loft," Harry said. "And I didn't move your bed," he added with a smirk. She flipped him off and the two girls left. Harry went to sleep.

The next day, Daphne talked to him about the pranks and was laughing by the time Harry was finished.

"I'll need your help on this next one though Daphne," Harry said.

Lily had taken to casting charms on her door that only a girl could unlock. Harry needed Daphne to unlock it for his next prank to work. He also sent Hedwig off to order something from Zonko's. It came in the next day.

Daphne agreed fairly quickly after he had explained his intentions. A couple days later he was ready to put it into action. They had been up really late, and it was the night before they would leave to Hogwarts. Lily was exhausted; the four of them had been up talking late. She went back to her room, then left to go to the bathroom.

Harry had Daphne let him in and reset the locks behind her and Harry climbed up the loft and hid under her sheets. When she got up to the top he popped up, yelled "Boo!" and shot her in the face with a can of Muggle Silly String that Zonko's had been kind enough to deliver. She screamed louder than humanly possible and Mr. Greengrass rushed to her doorway in his pajamas asking if she was being attacked. Lily assured him she was fine and turned to glare at Harry, although glare wasn't nearly strong enough a word. Harry began to understand the meaning of the phrase "trembling with

rage," because it was exactly what she was doing. Harry struggled not to laugh.

"I— will— kill— you— till— you're— dead," Lily bit out. "You— will— die!"

She began to pull the silly string out of her hair and continued to glare at Harry, still shaking.

"Oh, it's on, Potter." Harry laughed and patted her head, then pulled her into a hug.

"Get some sleep, Moon. You'll need it."

Harry headed to sleep but for once his efficient packing skills failed him. He had set his trunk out already prepared to leave. He had underestimated Lily Moon. With Daphne's help, they wrote and drew disturbing images on his trunk and wrapped it in toilet paper. Harry woke up in the morning and saw his broomstick propped against the door, wrapped completely in toilet paper. Not that his broomstick worked anymore. He sighed and saw his trunk was attacked. He cleaned it up as best he could and headed to Lily's room. On the way, he luckily ran into Daphne who helped him get into the room. Lily was in the bathroom. He took Lily's pillow, stuffed the pillowcase with all the toilet paper that had been on his broom before replacing it, then took the other pillowcase and stuffed all her underwear and bras into it before hiding it outside on the roof. He then returned to his room to shower.

Lily got out of the shower feeling quite happy with herself and went to take a short nap when her head fell right on the pillow that was no longer there. She screamed Harry's name and stalked towards his room, running into a mirthful Daphne.

"He— that— ugh! He took my pillow and stuffed it with toilet paper! I wanted to sleep!"

"That's not all he did," Daphne said, grinning broadly.

"What?" Lily said softly.

"You might want to find your underwear."

Lily screamed again and ran back to her room to find her underwear was indeed gone. She ran into Harry's room while Harry was still in the shower, took his pillowcases, stuffed all of his clothes into them, and threw them into the living room.

Harry came out of the shower to get dressed and gave a groan of dismay.

"I thought this was done with," he muttered. He headed to Lily's room, and saw her smiling at him.

"Missing anything, Potter?"

"Well, why don't you go get your pillows and underwear, Moon. They're on the roof."

Lily sighed dramatically and headed out there. Harry entered her room and took her shoes hostage, hiding them in Daphne's room. When she came back in, carrying her pillowcase full of underwear, Harry looked her in the eye.

"How about you trade me my clothes for your shoes?" Astoria was heard laughing loudly downstairs when Harry said that. Lily avoided looking at Harry's naked chest and smirked right back before his words truly sunk in.

Lily sputtered. "You took my shoes?" she shrieked. "I hate you!" She threw her wand to the floor and glared at him dramatically.

"You know what, I don't need my shoes," she said resolutely.

"I don't need my clothes," Harry fired back. "I have plenty I can get from Blaise."

Their staring contest continued. Ten seconds later, Lily broke down.

"Your clothes are downstairs. I can't bluff. I want my shoes."

"They're in Daphne's room," Harry said swiftly as he went down the stairs to get dressed. The duo gathered their respected belongings, repacked, and met in the entrance hall.

"Well, I've seen worse, Potter," Lily conceded, holding her trunk full of shoes protectively next to her.

Harry just smirked. "We can continue this later, but I think I might be able to work with you on a case by case basis."

Lily renewed her glare, but the eventual argument was broken up by the Greengrass sisters' timely arrival.

"Ready to go?" Astoria asked cheerfully.

Daphne flipped her hair to let her ocean-blue eyes see unimpaired and smiled. "I can't wait to go back to Hogwarts."

"I don't want to go back to Hogwarts," Luna whined. "I want to help," she pleaded, turning her protuberant orb-like eyes on her father. She played with her butterbeer cork necklace as she waited for him to pass judgment.

"You need to go, my Luna. This is something I must do. Hopefully you'll make some friends who aren't infested with Wrackspurts," Mr. Lovegood said with a small smile. He patted her head affectionately while gazing out the window.

Luna looked up at her father and couldn't think of anything to say. "Blaise seemed nice enough. I couldn't see any Wrackspurts around him, although I thought I noticed a Nargle or two flitting near his ears. You may want to watch out for that."

Luna nodded seriously. "I don't have much choice do I?"

Both of her father's eyes managed to focus straight on her, even though one was normally slightly cross-eyed. "Neither do I."

Blaise's mum brought him to Platform nine and three-quarters with a loud pop. He looked around, trying to find where his friends were at, but couldn't see them. They were probably running late. He highly doubted they were already on the train.

"So do you know when Dad will be back?"

"Your father is in France, helping a client. You know this."

Blaise sighed. His mum patted his head fondly. "He'll be back soon." Blaise rolled his eyes. It wasn't that he missed his father, he needed to talk to him.

"Have a nice semester, Blaise," Mrs. Zabini said and she cupped his cheek and looked at him with a smile. She leaned in and kissed his other cheek and sent him on his way, oblivious of the blush creeping up Blaise's neck.

Mrs. Zabini wondered if she lied too much to her son. She shook off the thought before it fully took hold of her and Disapparated away, hoping she was never caught out.

The pop signifying his Mother had left helped Blaise breathe easier. She could be annoying on occasion, and this was one of them. Blaise was going to need some new inventory for his underground store this semester and his father was in the best position to help him out. He would have to try owling him.

His thoughts took him into a compartment on the express and he was joined a few minutes later by Tracey and Hermione.

"Hey Blaise," they said together, startling him out of his thoughts.

"I didn't realize the two of you had become that good of friends," Blaise commented dryly.

"I'm sure the things you haven't realized could fill up half of the library," shot back Tracey. Blaise raised an eyebrow.

Tracey squared her stance, and in a moment of maturity, stuck her tongue out at him, prompting a snort from Blaise. The two girls took a seat across from him and put up their belongings.

"How was your summer?" Hermione asked.

Blaise shrugged. "Short," he replied casually. Hermione nodded sagely.

"I'm glad it was, I couldn't wait to come back." Blaise just shook his head, trying not to laugh.

"Where're Lily and Daphne and Harry?" Tracey asked.

"I'm not their keeper," Blaise said. Tracey huffed.

"That's what I get for expecting you to know something." Blaise glared half-heartedly.

"Go read a book," he shot back.

"Maybe I will."

"Clever comeback."

Blaise, Tracey, and Hermione looked to the new person in the compartment.

"Lily!" Tracey cried. The two hugged and sat down, allowing room for Daphne and Harry to walk in.

"Hey all," Harry said with a grin before tossing himself on the seat next to Blaise, who shoved him. Harry punched him in the arm and the two of them chuckled.

"Busy summer huh? I never got an owl," Harry said casually, stretching out on the seat.

"You could say that."

"I did," Harry said sarcastically.

Blaise laughed. "Excited for the Tournament?"

"It should be pretty entertaining," agreed Harry.

"Tournament?" Hermione asked.

"Yeah," Blaise and Harry replied in unison. Then they went back to talking.

"Hey!"

Blaise gave her a bored look. "Hello," he said, extending his hand.

Hermione looked annoyed.

"Something wrong, Granger?" Blaise asked again, knowing she was getting riled up.

"Are you planning on elaborating about this tournament?"

Blaise shrugged. "Not really, no."

"Boys," muttered Daphne. "They're talking about the Tri-Wizard Tournament." The two entered into a conversation discussing what it was, while Harry and Blaise made plans for their smuggled goods supplying business.

The train ride was relatively uneventful. Most people stayed in their compartments whispering about what had happened at the Quidditch World Cup. Looks that varied from suspicion and distrust to pity and sorrow seemed to follow the Weasleys, and Harry still hadn't heard the story about what happened to the youngest female Weasley. He was idly curious. But then, only idly, he wasn't planning on actively looking for the information.

"Firs' years, over here!" called a familiar voice, as they headed towards the carriages. Harry grinned at Hagrid who returned it with interest, thumping Harry on the back as he passed by, nearly sending him several meters forward into a crowd of excited second years. He managed to weave fluidly through the group and avoid them all without falling— until Lily stuck her leg out and tripped him.

Harry glared from his position on the ground. Lily smiled innocently and offered her hand to help him up. Harry dragged her down with him. She put on a look of mock outrage.

"How dare you bring me down to your level!" she cried, trying hard not to laugh.

Harry stood up and held his hand to her, offering to help her up, but when she grabbed it he didn't attempt to pick her up, instead letting his hand lie limp, while struggling not to laugh.

"Looks more like I'm bringing you up to my level," he deadpanned.

Lily mustered what dignity she could and stuck her tongue out at Harry before hopping into a nearby carriage.

It wasn't a moment too soon because thunder rumbled overhead, and it began raining heavily down on the Hogwarts students as the carriages took them to the castle.

When they finally arrived in the Great Hall, soaked from head to toe due to rain and Peeves's water balloons, a strange sight greeted them.

"Harry Potter."

"Kreacher?" Harry asked incredulously.

Harry moved them to the side, out of sight of the students and into a nearby alcove.

"Harry Potter must come with me immediately." And without any warning, Kreacher grabbed Harry's arm and popped away.

Harry arrived in Grimmauld Place, looking at Kreacher in shock, but the old house elf merely glared back and walked away, mumbling under his breath. Harry's wand was already in his hand and pointed, but there wasn't a target.

"Harry..."

Harry turned towards the voice and saw Sirius Black approaching him. He still looked miserable, but then, watching your best friend murdered right in front of you could probably do that.

"Sirius," Harry said cautiously. "Any reason why you kidnapped me again?"

"I don't get a warm hug saying hello? Or a, hey Sirius, so nice to see you again, how are you?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "Maybe if I had an invitation extended to me before I got here..."

"Kreacher just grab you or what?"

"Yes, actually. My friends are probably wondering what the hell just happened. Not to mention the professors. We were just about to go into the Great Hall for the Sorting."

"Right, well I'll be quick. I needed to warn you about Snape."

"What about him?" Harry asked cautiously.

"You saw how callously he executed... Moony..." Sirius's voice broke slightly, but he managed to get out what he wanted to say.

"Yes," Harry said quietly.

"He was pretty happy about it too. Especially since it wasn't murder to the Ministry, it was self-defense and putting down a sub-human. They wanted to give Snape a medal."

"That's not really appropriate," Harry replied.

"I'm glad to hear you still have a heart in there somewhere beneath that snake badge." Sirius forced out a chuckle and Harry only glared half-heartedly. The man really looked pitiful and Harry couldn't bring himself to hate him.

"So, what then? Watch out for Snape?"

Sirius looked on the verge of saying something, but stopped. Harry assumed he had nothing to say except that but noticed Sirius had the decency to look abashed. "Yeah, I guess that was all I needed to say."

Harry raised an eyebrow. Sirius squirmed under his gaze. "What?" he asked eventually.

"Animagus."

"Shit! I was going to help you with that wasn't I?" Harry tried very hard not to laugh. Instead, he continued staring at Sirius.

"What?"

"Potion."

"Damn. I need to do that. It's in stasis, I actually did start it."

"Right..."

"I'll have Kreacher bring it to you when it's finished."

"Sounds good. Can you have him take me back now before Dumbledore goes crazy? And how was he able to Apparate into Hogwarts anyway?"

"He didn't, he was already there. But house elves have their own way of getting around Hogwarts."

"How is he going to get me back?"

"He'll take you to the gates I imagine. Kreacher!" The old elf appeared when he was called and gave a low, mocking bow.

"Ungrateful traitor called Kreacher?"

"Yes, take Harry back to Hogwarts and don't talk to anyone else from the moment you leave this house until you return to it. I want you to take Harry to Hogwarts then return straight back here. Is that understood?"

"Kreacher lives to serve. But how he wishes it were a proper pureblood he was serving, oh if Mistress Black could see her house now..."

"Hurry up, Kreacher!"

"Come," Kreacher said, directing a gnarled finger at Harry, and before he knew it he was returned to Hogwarts, dropped off outside the gates and Kreacher had vanished once more. Harry dusted himself off and hurried back up to the castle. He made it to the Great Hall uninterrupted and saw the door to the Great Hall slowly starting to close and he squeezed himself in before it did. Everyone's eyes turned towards him and he realized he had made his entrance right after the polyjuiced Mad-Eye Moody. Harry nonchalantly slipped into a seat at the Slytherin table that Blaise had been saving for him.

Harry nodded quietly at Blaise, who returned it with a slightly raised eyebrow. "Later," Harry mouthed. And that was the end of it. Blaise was nothing if not discrete.

Snape was trying to burn a hole into Harry's head if the glare he had was any indication, but Harry tried to ignore it. Dumbledore acknowledged Harry's presence with a nod, and he noticed Professor Flitwick return into the Great Hall. Flitwick must have been looking for him, Harry mused.

Dumbledore cleared his throat and the students quieted down, as if by magic. "As I was saying," he began, with a grin threatening to appear behind his beard, "we are to have the honor of hosting a very exciting event over the coming months, one I haven't seen since I graduated from Hogwarts, well over a century ago. I take great pleasure in informing you that this year, at Hogwarts, we will play host to the Triwizard Tournament."

"You're JOKING!" said Fred Weasley very loudly. The Slytherin table remained unfazed, their parents or siblings having informed them of the tournament weeks ago.

The rest of the students laughed, breaking the uneasy silence that had been in the Hall, presumably from the arrival of Moody. Dumbledore chuckled at Fred's antics.

"I am not joking, Mr. Weasley," he said, "though now that you mention it, I did hear an excellent one over the summer about a troll, a hag, and a leprechaun who all go into a bar..."

Professor McGonagall cleared her throat loudly. However, George also chose that moment to speak up.

"Go on Professor, it sounds like a good one."

"It really was, Mr. Weasley. As I was saying, a troll, a hag, and a leprechaun go into a bar, and the leprechaun orders a shot of firewhiskey and throws it back in one gulp. Then he peeks in his shirt, and does the same thing. After the fourth time the bartender says, 'I'll give you another shot, but only if you tell me why you keep looking in your shirt.' The leprechaun looks at him and says, 'I drink till my wife looks pretty, so I can ignore the fact she's cheating on me with a troll.' Then the bartender gives him another shot and the

hag comes and punches him, knocking him out. 'Oi, why'd you do that?' the bartender asked. 'That's my husband,' replied the hag. 'Then are you the troll she cheats on him with?' asked the bartender. The troll scratched his head and shrugged. 'No,' said the hag, 'he's my son.'"

Harry choked on his pumpkin juice. Lily thumped him on the back.

After receiving a glare from McGonagall almost as powerful as a basilisk's stare, Dumbledore hastily coughed and moved on without preamble.

"The Triwizard Tournament; some of you may know what this entails, so please feel free to let your attention wander for a few moments. For those of you who are unsure of what I speak of, the Triwizard Tournament was an event that was held once every five years, before it was cancelled due to a high death toll. It involved the three largest Wizarding schools in Europe, Beauxbatons, Durmstrang, and of course, Hogwarts. Each school would put forth names of people wishing to compete, and a champion would be chosen by an impartial judge to represent their school. There are three champions, and three magical tasks. It was a great way to meet wizards and witches of different nationalities— until the death toll was deemed to be too high and it was discontinued."

"Some of the deaths were so bizarre..." Blaise muttered loud enough for Harry to hear.

"Several different attempts over the centuries to reinstate the tournament have met with failure, but our own departments of International Magical Cooperation and Magical Games and Sports have decided the time is ripe for another try. There have been many safeguards put in place to ensure that no champion will find his or her self in mortal danger."

"Like that will work," Lily mumbled. Harry avoided snorting. Only just.

"The heads of Beauxbatons and Durmstrang will be arriving with their students in October. The selection of the champions will be chosen on Halloween. An impartial judge will decide which students are the most worthy to partake in the tournament and fight for the Triwizard cup, the glory of their school, and the thousand galleon prize money."

All across the Great Hall, students' faces lit up, dreaming of claiming the prize money, or obtaining the glory that winning the Triwizard Tournament would entail. They began to whisper fervently to one another, arguing over their chances. Harry allowed himself a brief moment to imagine himself, emerging triumphantly through the maze, cup in hand, facing the cheering student body. His daydream was clearer because he remembered that he had been entered into the tournament last time, so it was more likely that the scenario he envisioned could come true. Again, his memories only lasted up to the start of the third task. So any foreknowledge he had would only be limited to the first two tasks.

"Now I know how most of you can already picture yourself bringing the Triwizard cup to Hogwarts, but after a joint discussion between the heads of the participating schools and our own Ministry of Magic, it has been decided that there will be an age restriction on the tournament, barring anyone under the age of 17 from competing—"

Cries of outrage followed this pronouncement and Dumbledore made calming motions with his hands. He continued speaking with a slightly raised voice in order to be heard.

"The tasks will be of a difficulty we believe highly unlikely for students under sixth or seventh year to be able to deal with successfully. I will personally ensure no one underage is able to hoodwink the impartial judge, so I must ask that you don't bother wasting your time submitting your name if you are not of age."

The majority of the Gryffindors and a handful of Ravenclaws looked mutinous. A few Hufflepuffs even seemed disappointed in the news. The Slytherins were mostly unreadable, but then, they probably anticipated the age restriction.

"The delegations from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang will arrive in October and remain with us for the majority of the year. I know that you will all extend every courtesy to our foreign visitors and make them feel welcome inside these halls, as well as throw your support behind the Hogwarts champion, whoever he or she will be. But now, it is late, and I will allow you all to depart for bed, as I know you wish to be awake and alert for your first day of classes. Bedtime! Chop chop!"

The students all stood up and left to their respective dormitories, chairs scraping as everyone rushed to leave the Great Hall. Harry and Blaise walked slowly together; Blaise updated Harry about the generalities of his contraband store that was running behind the scenes in Hogwarts and Harry mentioned how a house elf had needed to talk to him about something.

Blaise smirked. "You know, speaking of house elves, getting one or two of them to help wouldn't be a bad thing." Blaise remained quiet for the rest of the way to the dorms, contemplating how he could best use a house elf.

Harry grabbed a chair in the common room and ended up sitting with Lily, Daphne, and Astoria. Tracey spared him a small smile and headed to her room while the rest of them sprawled out near the couches. Harry noticed Malfoy in a corner with Pansy Parkinson, Crabbe, Goyle, and a couple older Slytherins, but paid them no mind. His eyes were on the three girls in front of him.

"So who do you think will get picked as the champion?" Astoria asked.

Lily looked pensive for a moment, before throwing a couple of unfamiliar names into the air.

"I hear Cedric Diggory thinks he's got a good shot," Daphne commented.

"Good thing Flint isn't here anymore or he'd probably try too," Harry said, getting a laugh from Lily.

"I bet that Gryffindor girl, the Chaser, what's her name again?" Daphne trailed off.

"Angelina Johnson," Harry answered absently. Daphne snapped her fingers.

"Her. She'll probably try too. It's a good thing the Weasley twins can't enter. It would be strange if only one got picked," Lily said.

Harry chuckled. "They'd probably just alternate."

"Would that even be legal?" Astoria asked.

"I doubt it would stop them," Blaise responded. He knew the Weasley twins the best, as they had an agreement about selling various Filch-banned items to students.

Harry was almost willing to agree, based on the memories Future-Harry provided about the Weasley twins from his first three and a half years or so of Hogwarts.

They made random predictions about what the tournament would hold for its tasks and if the other schools would be any good before retiring to bed. Harry wasn't going to be getting any sleep though. He had a conversation to hold.

"Hello, Harry."

"Hi, Harry," Future-Harry replied with a grin.

"I've got a problem..."

"You've got more than one."

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